



Moral Beauty in the Public Sphere

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MORAL BEAUTY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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I

My subject in this talk is the notion of moral beauty and ugliness, in the form of what I call the ‘moral beauty view’, considered in relation to the public sphere, and with a focus on such issues as moral education and motivation. My central aim is to make fellow researchers, and especially those with an empirical and practical outlook, aware of this notion, 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 education, motivation, and life in society at large. In doing so, my talk will be rather speculative, but the type of speculation in which I will engage 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 some of the greatest thinkers we know of. 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 the public sphere, namely, in artworks—including painting, architecture, installations, memorials, music; and in people 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, in addition to more abstract notions, 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 moral character cultivation. Before closing, I will address some preliminary worries one might raise against my suggestions.

II

The notion of moral beauty and ugliness is traceable to the British philosophers of the Enlightenment, particularly the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, and David Hume. It 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 both beautiful and good, and indeed Aristotle frequently suggests that the virtuous person’s actions are ‘kalon’ and performed for the sake of the ‘kalon’. In fact, I think that what I call the moral beauty view is a staple of Aristotelian virtue ethics, but will not further pursue this claim, because the terminology raises interpretative issues that I cannot broach here. Whatever it was that the Greeks thought, I suspect that Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam 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”;¹ or that taste arbitrates matters both moral and aesthetic, and that there is a “moral beauty”, which, he thought, “closely resembles” natural beauty;² 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”.³

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 the following: *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 By this, I mean a number of things. First, that the character traits in question themselves are beautiful and ugly, respectively. Second, that characters (and people) are beautiful and ugly, insofar as they possess or manifest such traits. An obvious worry here is that there are some ugly people who are morally virtuous. It is important here to clarify that I understand aesthetic evaluations in terms of beauty and ugliness to proceed in what philosophers call a *pro tanto* fashion. What this means is basically that when we say that this or that thing is beautiful or ugly

¹ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises*, ed. Wolfgang Leidhold, Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Fund, 2004, p.9.

² David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Lewis A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, p.291.

³ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.297.

⁴ In this, I follow Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p.120.

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 something like X is ugly, we are not necessarily saying X is ugly in every respect, but that it is ugly overall, i.e., all things considered (or, on balance, if you prefer). 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 manifest⁵ the relevant traits, or at least the motivation or intentions that are constitutive of such traits. Fourth, that artefacts that manifest such traits are also beautiful and ugly. I largely assume the claim that artworks can manifest character traits, but will say a few words by way of explanation.⁶ Artworks’ manifesting traits is not in virtue of representing characters that manifest certain attitudes. Villains in many a Shakespeare tragedy are highly immoral but Shakespeare’s tragedies hardly manifest moral vices; quite the contrary. Works manifest moral character traits in virtue of being artefacts in which choices of a manifested artist can be traced.⁷ 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.⁸

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

⁵ By which I mean that they are seen as the kinds of actions that a morally virtuous person would perform, even if not actually done by a morally virtuous person, i.e., by someone with the relevant settled disposition or set thereof. So to judge that an action is morally beautiful or ugly is to judge it as the kind of action that a morally virtuous or vicious person, respectively, would perform, under the given circumstances.

⁶ For a fuller defence, see Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, pp.67-76.

⁷ This is important. Whereas Mozart or Rembrandt were far from saintly, the manifested artists in their works, i.e., the character that emerges upon following through and interpreting the choices made in those works concerning *how* certain people, emotions, situations, etc., are represented, etc., often evince such virtues as respect, love, compassion, wisdom, dignity, etc.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.128.

extreme formalists,⁹ or the Romantics who sought to sever artistic or aesthetic from moral value,¹⁰ it turns out to be “contradictory to hold that beauty matters in art, but that morality does not”.¹¹ 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”.¹² 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.¹³ 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. This much logically follows from the moral beauty view. 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. Presumably, this applies *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 that domain.

Now, it is not my aim to defend the moral beauty view here, not least because I have done so elsewhere.¹⁴ Instead, as already said, my focus here will be narrower; specifically, I want to concentrate on how the presence of virtue in the public sphere, seen through the lens of the moral beauty view, can contribute to the cultivation of moral character—both within and outwith formal character education. So, let me begin by suggesting two ways in which moral beauty (and ugliness) can be manifested in the public sphere.

⁹ E.g., Cline Bell, *Art*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1928; Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981.

¹⁰ Cf. Robert Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995, p.4.

¹¹ Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, p.132. Cf. Eaton, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical*.

¹² Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.138.

¹³ Burke, *Enquiry*, pp.101-102.

¹⁴ Panos Paris, *Aesthetics, Ethics, and Character: A Defence of the Moral Beauty View*, PhD Dissertation, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, 2017; Panos Paris, “The Empirical Case for Moral Beauty”, forthcoming in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.

I have several arguments for different claims integral to the view, but perhaps the most encompassing one proceeds by showing that the moral beauty view emerges as the best explanation of a series of thought experiments and empirical evidence, centred around the phenomenon where we judge others to be more or less beautiful (or ugly), insofar as we judge them to be more or less virtuous (or vicious).

III

Moral beauty is a feature of people's characters, and so of people themselves. Consider some examples. After Michael Jordan's father was murdered and his killer apprehended, the famous basketball player was asked whether he would like to see him on death row; his response was: 'Why? That wouldn't bring him back.'¹⁵ There is a gentleness, poignancy, and considerateness in Jordan's response. This is all the more pronounced if his response is seen in the context of the American society in which Jordan was revered, and where the norms of masculinity involved would likely favour payback, probably in *lex talionis* fashion. Seen in this light, I would suggest, Jordan's response is pleasurable to contemplate, partly thereby bestowing a beauty to this public figure, which informs the way we then perceive his public persona. Another, more powerful example is Lupita N'yong'o's Oscar acceptance speech, wherein she speaks of her character's moral beauty, and of the importance of being beautiful within and not (merely) on the outside:

I remember a time when I too felt unbeautiful. I put on the TV and only saw pale skin. I got teased and taunted about my night-shaded skin. And my one prayer to God, the miracle worker, was that I would wake up lighter-skinned. ... my mother again would say to me, "You can't eat beauty. It doesn't feed you." And these words plagued and bothered me; I didn't really understand them until finally I realized that beauty was not a thing that I could acquire or consume, it was something that I just had to be. ... What does sustain us ... what is fundamentally beautiful is compassion for yourself and for those around you. That kind of beauty enflames the heart and enchants the soul. It is what got Patsey in so much trouble with her master, but it is also what has kept her story alive to this day. We remember the beauty of her spirit even after the beauty of her body has faded away.¹⁶

What I take to be morally praiseworthy and to ground the beauty of this speech is twofold, in that not only does it treat with honesty and a gentle directness important issues of race and gender,

¹⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p.24.

¹⁶ Quoted from Jenn Selby, "12 Years A Slave Star Lupita Nyong'o on Racism in Beauty: 'Everyday I Woke Up Hoping My Skin Was a Little Lighter'", *The Independent*, Wednesday, 5 March, 2014, accessed on 25 April, 2016. URL= <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/lupita-nyongoon-racism-in-beauty-every-day-i-woke-up-hoping-my-skin-was-a-little-bitlighter-9171487.html>>.

but it also stems from a recognition that these issues are transcended, in reality albeit unfortunately not in practice, by an accordance of priority to character in the order of value, and, indeed, beauty. So it seems to me that the moral outlook encapsulated in this speech lends a beauty to it that, arguably, outweighs what is an otherwise somewhat sentimental approach. Other examples include, for instance, the famous ‘I had a dream’ speech by Martin Luther King, and lesser known statements by public figures, while there are, of course, much more obvious examples of moral beauty than the foregoing—of saints, heroes, and sages, for instance¹⁷—but I do wish to point to the less elevated cases here, for, as George Eliot pointed out, we should be able to appreciate not only the beauty of ideals, but also that of the “more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people, whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire—for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience”.¹⁸ Below I also suggest that different levels of subtlety and complexity can have an educative role to play in our sensitivity to moral beauty.

Although moral beauty and ugliness are centrally features of people, and more abstractly, people’s characters, like much beauty, I think that they can also be found in artworks, such as Bach’s music, or buildings like churches and houses, as well as memorials. This is because artworks can manifest certain personality traits; these are identifiable by tracing the choices that have culminated in the end product, and which contribute to their beauty. 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 difficulty, and a belief that this is what we both bring and has been taken out of the world in an act such as the 9/11 terror attacks, which seems like the morally apt response to the subject matter at stake. Here are some more examples. In Bach’s *Erbarme dich, mein Gott*, sincere “compassion and empathy”¹⁹ pervades 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

¹⁷ See Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

¹⁸ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.160.

¹⁹ Hendrik Storme, “Interview” (interview with the director of *Klara Festival*, Brussels’ international music festival), quoted from *Klara Festival* website, 2016, accessed on 25 April, 2016. URL = <<http://www.klarafestival.be/en/content/interview>>.

appears in the novel in question) manifests on every page, and which is at least part of what makes this novel 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 dilemma put to her by Creon, amidst a work which highlights the limits and limitations of the human condition, when she recognises the dilemma's genuineness and confronts it at face value. And there is great beauty, too, in Father Zosima's quiet humility in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as well as in 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*.²⁰

My view is that the undeniable beauty of such works is inseparable from the moral qualities 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. I hope that these examples will suffice to illustrate what I have in mind in speaking of moral beauty in artworks.

So what is the point of advancing such cases and pointing out the moral beauty in them, supposing, as aforementioned, that they are cases of genuine beauty? My suggestion is that familiarity with the notion of moral beauty and ugliness, and its presence in one's conceptual framework, will allow one to see moral virtues and vices in aesthetic terms; and that this, provided that moral beauty assumes a prominent position in the public sphere, whichever form it may take, is essential to a complete programme of character education, while also being particularly congenial to the maintenance of virtuous people 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 attractiveness and is the object of love (or, as I would put it, it is in fact the beautiful individual that is the object of love);²¹ beauty prompts copies of itself;²² the beautiful object is said to be valued for its own sake, not merely the pleasure which it evokes.²³ 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, then, as our

²⁰ Cf. Virginia Woolf's comments on Dostoevsky's literary mastery at capturing the human soul in "The Russian Point of View", in Andrew McNeillie (ed.), *The Common Reader: Volume 1*, London: Vintage, 2003, pp.173-182.

²¹ Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

²² Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

²³ Roger Scruton, *Beauty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

intellectual predecessors thought, it is plausible that it may pave a solid route towards moral virtue, and one that also taps into the right affective dimensions.

IV

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 (henceforth JCCV), recognises a number of ways in which character can be acquired: it can be taught, caught, and sought.²⁴ Now, traditionally, the acquisition of character through teaching will, I suspect, mostly consist in gaining what we might call (following JCCV's terminology) '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.²⁵ If the moral beauty view is true, however, this will not suffice for virtue. After all, evidently, mere virtue literacy, even coupled with a sense of duty, or even components of *phronesis* comprising reasoning and skills enabling fine conceptual discriminations, are a far cry from the sort of ideal of Aristotelian virtue, mentioned in the beginning of this paper, where the virtuous individual—starting from imitation of behaviour and internalisation of such behaviour,

²⁴ In addition to teaching, character can 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 imposed on students (e.g., through uniforms, particular etiquette, etc.); 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 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 because one is attracted to it in one way or other, can lead to its pursuit.

²⁵ "A Framework for Character Education in Schools", The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017, p.8.

It is also possible that teaching can contribute to the acquisition of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, which is Aristotle's term for an intellectual virtue that sustains moral virtue. The *phronimos* is someone who will reliably decide what the humanly best thing to do would be in a situation, and respond appropriately, insofar as she has the discriminative ability to identify the salient aspect of a situation, the sensitivity and reasoning skills to weigh these in light of the situation, and the affective and motivational structure that tracks (or complements) her reasoning in such situations. This, however, is still something to be seen, namely whether *phronesis* can, even in part, be taught. That said, some of the considerations that I will advance below will, among other things, show that taking the moral beauty view on board can perhaps contribute to the cultivation (and teaching) of *phronesis* too, insofar as moral beauty can help increase one's moral sensitivity, discriminative capacities, and cultivate one's motivational profile. I hope to reflect further on this issue on a future occasion.

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. Hence, teaching must either be tailored to encompass the acquisition of an aesthetic vocabulary, sensibility, and sensitivity, and to inspire and instil the skills that, as I shall now suggest, the appreciation of moral beauty and ugliness both require and foster; otherwise taught virtue will never be full virtue, unless it is supplement from outwith the domain of teaching.

Many thinkers have been tempted by the thought that an education in beauty can contribute to moral development. Of course, many today would consider such views plain wishful thinking. But this may be due to our having 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 such views 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 so on.²⁶ If the connection between beauty and desire, attraction, love, a tendency to emulate the beautiful object, etc., are facts about our normal 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, first, the domain of moral motivation. 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, hence a fully-fledged first-person moral judgement is also aesthetic, and it is a commonplace that beauty arouses conative states in those who appreciate it. 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 non-aesthetic 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.

This suggests that it is possible, if not plausible, given the foregoing, that considerable exposure to morally beautiful artworks and people can instil in us the (true) belief that moral virtue is

²⁶ See footnotes 15-17.

beautiful and vice ugly, and perhaps even go some way towards increasing our sensitivity to these qualities. 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 express emotions and attitudes; manifested artists can also display these through their choices; as can characters in narratives through their dialogues, interior monologues, choices, behaviours, etc. By experiencing, say, 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, and so on, not only in terms of their manifest configurations, but also in terms of their moral-characterological explorations. Perhaps, then, artworks can sharpen our discriminative abilities and refine our taste for moral beauty. This, I think, should count as a morally-relevant cognitive improvement, and one that resembles closely aspects of the virtue of *phronesis*.

Earlier I also spoke about the moral beauty of people, specifically people who are well-known especially through accomplishments other than their virtuous behaviour or character. Such people include politicians, artists, including 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, this can play an equally important, if not more important, role in inspiring the pursuit of, and helping to instil, virtue in people. 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 get caught through the presence of moral beauty in the public domain. I also wish to suggest, albeit more tentatively, that people who are already admired—or in some cases, for better or worse, nearly worshipped—including pop stars, actors, and so on, can substantially contribute to promoting virtue through their public profile.

This is a more adventurous thought, and one which I cannot elaborate here in any detail, but the idea is this: there is evidence that we copy people that we find to possess status. Moreover, this imitative impulse is, in the first place, not too selective (this probably serves to ensure accuracy or that one does not miss the salient features through some blindspot or other, in evolutionary terms); that is, we tend to copy others in more respects than the ones for which we admire them or look up to them; so, we will copy the clothes and shower gel used by the football player (television commercials are sufficient proof of this), and drive the pop star's car. In the second place, this tendency is both very pronounced and, more often than not, automatic and unconscious, at least to some degree. Indeed, this tendency can be so pronounced as to lead to extremely maladaptive behaviours: there is evidence that suicides by celebrities are often followed by waves of suicides of admirers that are best explained as imitative behaviours, as opposed to, say, mental health problems and the like.²⁷ If features and behaviours so peripheral or extreme as hair colour or suicide are imitated, then it would seem a safe bet that virtue, provided it features prominently enough in a public figure's profile, and is displayed consistently, will also be imitated; indeed, on the assumption that it is beautiful, and despite its being difficult to imitate, it is at the same time motivationally better supported than other (non-beautiful) features while also a more central aspect of its possessors, and therefore, I suggest more likely to be imitated than others.

In sum, it looks like the presence of moral beauty in the public sphere will increase the likelihood that virtue will be caught or sought by the public.

V

Against my claims it may be objected, first, that beauty is only a matter of appearance, so the proposals here are actually dangerous.

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 to 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

²⁷ These claims, including the imitative suicide literature, are discussed in Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, esp. pp.34-53.

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 the mere surface of a thing, as opposed to its deeper structure or ‘true nature’, so to speak. Thus, a car may look good, but be very badly put together, or a flower can be beautiful even though it is actually 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 this written version of it is ugly insofar as the calligraphy (or cacography, for that matter), goes. Likewise, I think, we can say in the previous cases 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 or *qua* a car and a 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 way of talking and of looking at morality seems to locate moral motivation in precisely the wrong place, i.e., the beauty, rather than the intrinsic worth of, the good. This second objection is perhaps more problematic for at least some of my claims, perhaps most conspicuously the point about copying the virtue of public personas. For, it may be said, the reasons for imitation in such cases are at best inappropriate, at worst incompatible with virtue.

In response, I must grant that the initial mimetic response may perhaps be inappropriate, though I am sceptical even as I type this. For the fact that it is impulsive or automatic does not make it inappropriate; what might perhaps do so is, first, the grounding of the response on other, non-moral, qualities, and, second, the fact that those qualities are not imitated and acquired (if they

are), for their own sake. But I don't think these are problems for me either; I think we tend to idealise how we are supposed to acquire the good traits we have and to underplay how our attitudes, beliefs, etc., are to a large extent outcomes of our impulse to imitate people for non-moral reasons, such as our parents, our friends, teachers, celebrities, and that many of them were largely down to luck or imposition, without our having much of a say. This is why many highly intelligent and well-educated people are sometimes found to be defending prejudices in the most skilful and eloquent ways imaginable. At any rate, the point is that much of our character is, at least in the first instance, acquired through teaching or imitation of those whom we (or others) deem prestigious.²⁸ So this is no more a problem for my view than it is for any other proposal for character education.

The second point is that to the extent that the people I have in mind take an interest in successfully imitating virtue, as they see it in public figures, appreciate it in artworks, etc. the fact that these qualities are not acquired for their own sake should and will change, if the imitation is to be truthful: for one will eventually realise that not wishing those qualities for their own sake or not valuing them in the appropriate way in fact leads to a poor imitation of people who are truly virtuous. Failure to imitate virtue for its own sake, moreover, will be pre-empted by moral virtues' being in fact beautiful, so that we will probably not even need to happen upon the aforementioned epiphany: for once their beauty is noticed, they will slowly come to appear in their true light, namely as rewarding in themselves.

Third, 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 evidently fails to observe the dialectic in my paper. The problem is the conspicuous absence of any discussion of moral beauty and ugliness from most debates in both philosophy and, more importantly perhaps, moral education and motivation. The 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 entail additions and modifications to them. Beauty cannot replace learning a

²⁸ Cf. Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*.

vocabulary, understanding the relevant distinctions, knowing something about the history of ethics and the different moral theories, or acquiring reasoning skills and experience. What it can do is inspire a love of virtue, a motivation to acquire it and to respond accordingly, to increase our morally relevant discriminatory capacities and sensitivity, and, partly thereby to activate and intensify pleasure in its pursuit. These are not the same thing under different descriptions, though they are complementary. Whether or not my suggestions on ways in which the focus on beauty and ugliness can contribute to the moral life hold up to empirical scrutiny is a different question and one for a different kind of investigation from the one pursued herein.

Finally, my proposal may seem to provide justification for a dangerous programme of censorship and control of the media and other public cultural products.

This objection is also misguided; if anything, cultivating sharp discriminative skills and heightened sensitivity to moral beauty and ugliness should reduce the need for such interventions. This is because once such traits are in place, people will no longer be easily swayed by this programme or that, or whatever it is people claim distorts people's character (a claim that I am highly suspicious of). They will seek out programming that they consider good and, where vice is presented, they will see it in true light—since that means seeing it as ugly, then so much the better: that will further secure their dislike of vice. Of course, my proposal does place some responsibility on those who make decisions on what sculpture to erect on a public square, what films to screen on national television, whether to demolish a building or a statue, and what kind of music or programmes to air on public radio, but it neither requires the replacement of programming with moral-educative material, nor, indeed, does it suggest anything over and above good quality programming. In this sense, it adds no further weight than is already upon the shoulders of media policymakers—if anything, it lifts off some of it.

VI

I began 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 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 grounding moral motivation and the cultivation of virtue. I ended by

rebutting some objections to my suggestions, to conclude that they have considerable merit, and should therefore be taken seriously by those with an eye to empirical studies, who could probe into the empirical validity of the notion, as well as enquire into its potential implications for the relationship between affect and cognition, learning, motivation, and the like; as well as those with a role in character education, who could seek ways of devising relevant interventions and assessing their merits and defects.