

Chapter 1: Ideas of Beauty, Ideals of Character

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Abstract This chapter presents several of the dominant ideas and intellectual debates about human beauty from archaic Greece to early Christianity. At issue are ideals of character, ethical ideals of who one should be and how one should live. What constitutes beauty and why beauty matters change over these centuries alongside conceptions of body and soul, virtue and happiness, and the relationship between human beings and the divine.

Keywords beauty; body; soul; virtue; happiness; divine

Around 500 BCE, on a couch at a male-only drinking party in Athens, you might have heard a young man sing:

I wish I were a beautiful ivory lyre,
and that beautiful boys would bring me to the Dionysian dance.

Not to be outdone, in chimes his friend:

I wish I were a big, beautiful piece of unsmelted gold,
and that a beautiful woman would wear me, one who made her mind pure.¹

(Athenaeus, *The Banqueters* 15.695c–d = *Poetae Melici Graeci* fr. 900–1)

¹ Translations are my own unless otherwise noted, based upon the text of standard editions.

These wishes are fun and fanciful. But their desire for beauty is perfectly serious. Throughout antiquity, much like today, beauty is central to a good life. The paradigm of beauty is not such objects as lyres and jewelry, of course, but human beings. Nevertheless, these wishes reveal why beauty matters to a whole life: one aspires, not simply to be around beautiful people, but to *be* beautiful oneself. This chapter presents several dominant ideas and intellectual debates about what this means from archaic Greece to early Christianity under the Roman empire. The central conviction is that ideas of beauty are ideals of character, ideals of who one should be and how one should live. However, as the dueling couplets above already suggest, these ideals are constantly contested. In what follows, I focus on three related issues that govern these debates:

1. *The nature of beauty.* What makes human beings beautiful? What or whose features are prized, by whom, and why? Are these features of the body, the soul, or both? At stake here are general ideas of what it is to be human but also specific distinctions of sex, gender, and class.
2. *The value of beauty.* Are beautiful people good? Does beauty reveal virtue or conceal vice? Does the experience of beauty in others or oneself make one's life better or worse? At stake here are ideas of the good life or happiness.
3. *The relationship between human and divine.* Does human beauty derive from divine beauty? Does being beautiful make someone (more) divine? Does the experience of beauty help or hinder proper relations with the gods or God? At stake here are ideas of the order of reality, how one can know it, and the ideal of becoming godlike between Greco-Roman philosophy and early Christianity.

These three issues may serve as general orientation for readers. Some thinkers discussed below treat all three together, while others are concerned with one or another issue alone. I have necessarily emphasized, however, the broader patterns of thought that develop and transform as

philosophers and poets engage with one another and their cultural contexts. Since this is a conversation constructed through literary sources composed mainly by elite males, it will be worthwhile to consider the extent to which the following ideas regulate the practices of beautification discussed in later chapters.

1. Epic and Archaic Greek Poetry

The earliest Greek literature presents human beauty as a superhuman condition. From the great Homeric epics of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (c. 8th–7th-century BCE) through archaic poetry (c. 700–450 BCE), beauty among human beings signals a divine presence or godlike status. The gods are paragons of beauty, none more so than Aphrodite, goddess of beauty and sex. Human beauty is conceived relative to and often as a gift from the gods. Reflected chiefly by the noun *kallos* (Konstan 2014), beauty has the character of an independent substance. Gods apply beauty onto mortals like smiths apply gold and silver onto armor or like one uses makeup or a fragrant perfume (*Odyssey* 18.190–4; cf. 6.234–5, 8.457–60; *Iliad* 6.156–7; Hesiod, *Works and Days* 65–6). Sometimes this divine dispensation steels mortals against difficult situations. Two excellent examples appear in the *Odyssey*, which recounts the hero Odysseus’ homecoming to Ithaca after the Trojan War, recounted in the *Iliad*. The first is when the goddess Athena pours grace (*charis*) upon Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, before he faces a group of men plotting to kill him and marry his mother, Penelope (*Odyssey* 2.12–3). The second is when Athena enhances Penelope’s own beautiful features (*prosōpata kala*) with a balm of immortal beauty (*kallei ambrosiō(i)*) to make her taller, grander, and fairer before she confronts the suitors in her palace (18.192–6).² Height,

² *Charis* is closely related, sometimes equated, to *kallos*: e.g., *Odyssey* 6.237, 23.156–62. For Homeric terminology of beauty, see Konstan 2014: 35–43 and Shakeshaft 2019.

fullness, and luminosity are telltale marks of beauty in Homer, as throughout antiquity. And the suitors' response is paradigmatic. Weakened in the knees and wishing to bed Penelope, their hearts are enchanted by erotic desire, *erōs*.

Axiomatic to ancient Greek and Roman thought is that beauty elicits erotic desire. Erotic desire is an intense, passionate longing to have closer and fuller contact with something or someone. One can have this desire for such things as food or drink or for people in non-sexual ways, for example in forms of admiration. But the paradigm is, as above, sexual attraction to a person whom one finds beautiful (*kalon*).³ The experience is torturous, a maddening mix of pleasure and pain that drives someone out of their wits, beyond social and ethical norms, and often to their ruin, as the chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 BCE) later warns (lines 781–800). The whole mind and body are captivated, yet this response often begins with the *sight* of beauty; a common term for physical beauty, *eidōs*, means 'appearance' and is etymologically linked with verbs of seeing.⁴ This sight, too, reveals the heightened presence and power of the gods. For the sight of beauty is at its peak an erotic experience of wonder (*thauma*) in which the divine appears present. When in Odysseus finds himself ashore in Phaeacia in the *Odyssey*, freshly washed, his hair curled and build increased by Athena's beautifying grace, he looks so much like a god that the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa, herself lovely like an immortal goddess (6.16), gazes awestruck and longs for a husband just like him (6.229–45). Similarly, in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (5.84–106), Anchises is seized with erotic desire as he wonders at the goddess, glimpsing divinity

³ See further the contribution of Courtney Ward to this volume.

⁴ Among recent studies of vision in ancient Greece, see Squire 2016 and Kampakoglou and Novokhatko 2018.

in her size, shining golden earrings, and elaborate dress “more radiant than the brightness of fire” (5.86)—an effective costume if a poor disguise by which Aphrodite seduces Anchises as a maiden. The wondrous and radiant sight of beauty manifests the divine, paradoxically, in the mortal realm (Neer 2010: 58–68).

The godlike status of beauty indicates also human excellence or virtue (*aretē*). The seductive force of beauty, however, complicates evaluations of female beauty. For males and females alike, beauty belongs especially to youth. For both, beauty indicates gendered ideals of virtue that define what it is to be a good man or a good woman. Yet a woman’s beauty is her defining power, akin for one male poet to a man’s intelligence (Anacreon fr. 24). Many men imagine that such beauty threatens their power to rule themselves and others.

So it is that *kallos* in Homer applies to men and women in equal number, though not at all equally. Gods take beautiful young men to Olympus ‘because of their beauty’ for their own pleasure (*Iliad* 6.156, 20.235; *Odyssey* 15.251). Yet there is seldom hint of diminished agency, deception, or disaster. Not so with female beauty. A common pattern is to blame female beauty for causing devastation, whether in one’s life or on a political or cosmic scale. The trope begins with the mythical judgment of Paris, which provokes the Trojan War.⁵ Paris is tasked to decide who among Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite is most beautiful. The title presupposes that beauty is not merely ‘in the eye of the beholder’ but a feature of things, there to be discerned by competent beholders like the beautiful Paris. Tellingly, each goddess covets the title, so essential is beauty to femininity. Thus, Hera and Athena compete on Aphrodite’s ground. In a version attributed,

⁵ Herodotus’ variation seems to indict more so the rapacious desire of men, tracing the Persian Wars to King Candaules’ demand that Gyges see his beautiful wife naked (*Histories* 1.8–9).

probably inaccurately, to Apollodorus of Athens (born c. 180 BCE), the goddesses offer bribes, kingship and martial victory respectively, which proclaim the superior value and beauty of their special spheres of life (*Epitome* 3.2).⁶ Yet these are no match for Aphrodite's offer: the most beautiful woman, Helen, daughter of Zeus. Helen is married to Menelaus, however, and so must be seduced or 'taken' by Paris, a deed that sets sail a thousand ships at devastating cost to human life. Whether or to what extent Helen deserves blame for acting voluntarily remains controversial within the epic cycle and throughout classical Greek history, rhetoric, and tragedy (Blondell 2013). But the lesson is supposed to be clear: beautiful women bring disaster. The result is the fundamentally ambivalent attitude that female beauty is desirable yet feared for undesirable consequences. This attitude may extend to how women under patriarchy view themselves. Beauty becomes, in a double bind, an index of ethical praise and blame.

The worry that female beauty causes harm, not just as the object of erotic desire, but through the desire and agency of women animates the myth of Pandora in Hesiod. To punish humanity after Prometheus stole fire from the gods, divine smith Hephaestus fashions the first female, Pandora. A "beautiful evil" (*kalon kakon*, *Theogony* 585), Pandora is gifted with human speech, strength, and a deceitful mind with which to use these cunningly. Her cunning intelligence signals that beauty may deceive, such that men may "delight while embracing their own undoing"

⁶ If the great value and contested terms of beauty do not explain why Hera and Athena willingly compete on Aphrodite's terrain, as Blondell 2013: 2 argues, the story might seem comical. So, Euripides' *Trojan Women* and Konstan 2014: 66.

(*Works and Days* 58). Yet this cunning partly constitutes female beauty.⁷ One focal point of Pandora's beauty is her power of voice; her throat is adorned with necklaces by Grace and Persuasion. Another is her radiant hair, crowned and covered with flowers atop her veiled face (*Theogony* 576–80; *Works and Days* 65–76). The veil signifies a virgin on the cusp of marriage (*parthenos*), whose liminal status connotes and compounds anxiety about women in general [Fig. 1.1 NEAR HERE].⁸ The concern is not only that desiring Pandora causes one to lose *self*-control (as when a smitten Epimetheus takes her into his house and she opens a jar of evils onto the world; 94–104). The concern is also to control the desires of desirable women themselves. Primarily at issue are sexual desires, to ensure that each woman bears children to only one man, whose good name depends on his lineage; however, Pandora's curiosity brings desires for knowledge also to the fore. Unsurprisingly, social and legal restrictions on archaic and classical Greek women revolve around Hesiod's two focal points. A woman's persuasive voice is silenced in public discourse; her hair, face, eyes—her own gaze—are veiled, her bodily movements hidden from public

⁷ Compare Hera's 'deception of Zeus' (*Iliad* 14.214–21). There is overlap here with one strand of thought that applies also to males, which locates beauty in a crafty or variable (*poikilos*) character. Odysseus is one exemplar. See further Grand-Clément 2015.

⁸ A telling detail of the *Theogony* version is that Pandora becomes grammatically feminine, after being described in neuter terms, just as she is presented to gods and mortal men. But it is *she* who delights in her adornment at this moment (*agallomenēn*, 587). The same verb (*agallomai*) describes Hector and Paris taking pride in their appearance (*Iliad* 6.506–11). The related adjective, *aglaios*, connotes the radiant beauty of youth.

view (Pomeroy 1975; Winkler 1990). In the name of self-control or modesty (*sophrosynē*), “a good woman knows her place and stays inside as much as possible” (Blondell 2013: 22).

While this misogynistic treatment of beauty remains all too familiar, the emphasis on male beauty in ancient Greece from Homer onward may surprise. But these are two sides of the same coin. Whereas in the imaginations of men female beauty bears harm, male beauty bears signs of ‘the good,’ and this in related ethical and social senses. Male beauty is taken to *manifest* the virtue of the ruling elite, the warrior-chieftain or ‘good man’ (*agathos*). Such men aim to have their honour (*timē*) recognized and, above all, to win glory (*kleos*) in battle. This is an ideal at once of body and mind. To this end courage is principal. Its physical expressions, great size and strength, make a handsome frame (Donlan 1999: 23, 106). The paradigm here is Achilles, the hero whose martial prowess and devastating wrath at Troy the *Iliad* recounts. Thus Achilles, ‘the best of the Achaeans’ and most beautiful (*kallistos*) of all men at Troy (*Iliad* 2.673–4), boasts how large and beautiful he is (21.108–10). The military leader of the Achaeans, Agamemnon, is so beautiful (*kalos*), mighty, noble, and tall that Helen of Troy—whose abduction by Paris spurs the Trojan War—knows Agamemnon is a king even though she has no idea who is he (3.166–70). The best men look the part, the more conspicuously with long hair, beardless chins, and purple robes (Archilochus fr. 60D). A similar aesthetic, though with dark, thick, and curly hair and a voluptuous vitality, marks the ideal elite male in ancient Mesopotamian art and literature (Winter 1995).

The ethical and social complexion of these ideas raises a fundamental methodological question: how can one illuminate the contours of ancient conceptions of beauty? Indeed, what would show that one is inquiring into the history of the concept of *beauty* at all? It risks anachronism to conclude that ancient thinkers possess some concept simply because we can understand their patterns of thought in terms of it. But should it be necessary to appeal to that

concept, the conclusion would be safer. Such is the case with the noun *kallos*, for which the translation *beauty* seems unavoidable. The difficulty, of course, is understanding what beauty was for ancient Greeks—a difficulty exacerbated by the fact that we hardly have a perspicuous grasp of *our own* concept. The issue is well brought out by the fusion of aesthetic, ethical, and social dimensions of the adjective *kalos*, noted a moment ago. The adjective praises the attractive appearance of bodies, well-composed artefacts, political customs, and virtuous character and actions. We might not call all these *beautiful*. But what follows from this? A dominant view throughout the last century has been that *kalos* does not reflect well the concept of beauty and means primarily what is *fine*, *admirable*, or *noble* (notably Croce [1911] 1995: 156–66; Dover 1974: 70; Konstan 2014). On this view, Achilles—who is superlatively *kalos* but never attributed *kallos*—is likely boasting about his nobility, not his beauty. However, it is questionable whether attributions of beauty may be so sharply distinguished from admirable qualities or symbols of status, either in antiquity or today.⁹ As students of antiquity navigate the peculiarities of another intellectual and cultural context, they may also become more self-conscious of their own.

If words offer initial insight into ancient Greek ideas, then, it is necessary to look further to how concepts function within a constellation of ideas and cultural practices. A modern reader for whom beauty connotes femininity might suppose this to be the reason why Achilles is never attributed *kallos* whereas Paris is. Paris' lovely features match his passion for sensuous beauty

⁹ See further Nietzsche's remarks in *On the Genealogy of Morality* I.5 ([1887] 1994) and Lissarague 1999 on *kalos*-inscriptions. On the contemporary front, Wolf 1991 remains indispensable. Murdoch 1970, Nehamas 2007, and Kraut 2013 draw relevant insights from Plato and Aristotle into ethical dimensions of beauty.

found in sex, elaborate clothes, perfumes, and home décor (*Iliad* 3.340–454, 6.313–24), a passion that keeps company with cowardice. As Paris flees from battle, Hector imagines the Achaeans laughing, having thought Paris valiant on account of his beauty (3.43–5). But if his good looks make him look better than he is, Paris is the exception that proves the rule: male beauty manifests virtue according to the Homeric scheme of values.¹⁰ In the context of those values, the contrast between Paris and Achilles—or the noun *kallos* and adjective *kalos*—is a contrast not between beauty and masculine virtue but between two ethically significant ways for a man to be beautiful. Males are admired for their beauty, indeed erotically. The difference made by sex and gender is that male beauty is not only less problematical but less sexualized. An amorous gaze at Achilles is less obviously for the sake of sex than in the case of his female counterparts. It is more obviously for the sake of emulation.

The ideal for which one emulates heroic beauty is glory (*kleos*). To live for the sake of glory is to die courageously, a beautiful or noble death. A stunning strand of Homeric poetry, which lends heroes lustre, is the aestheticization of death and dying. Whether this glorifies war, transmutes its horrors, or condemns it by bringing humanity to otherwise unknown figures, as when Simoeisius is cut down like a handsome black poplar (*Iliad* 4.442–3), beauty crucially functions to preserve the deceased body from decay so that the hero's identity and deeds may be remembered by future generations (Vernant 1991: ch. 2).¹¹ As Trojan king Priam puts the heroic

¹⁰ For this physiognomy, witness also Thersites: ugliest at Troy, bowlegged, bald, he is beaten by Odysseus for criticizing the Homeric system of honour (*Iliad* 2.211–77).

¹¹ Compare Euphorbus cut down like a blossoming olive tree (*Iliad* 17.51–6); Patroclus' shining body before death (16.805); Hector's corpse (22.370–1, 24.757–8).

ideal, “For a young man all is seemly [*pant’ epeoiken*] when he is cut down in battle and torn with sharp bronze and lies there dead, and though dead, still all that shows about him is beautiful [*panta de kala... phanēē(i)*]” (*Iliad* 22.71–3). The corpse shines splendidly, signaling in death an outstanding life that, in the archaic imagination, will therefore be recounted in beautiful song. The notion of a beautiful death would retain some appeal in various forms for centuries, whether in elegies of Spartan poet Tyrtaeus (10.21–32), Pericles’ funeral oration for fallen Athenian soldiers in 431 BCE (Thucydides 2.35–46; Loraux 1986), or Tacitus’ serene portrayal of the suicide of Roman philosopher-statesman Seneca in 65 CE (*Annals* 15.60–4). **[Fig. 1.2 NEAR HERE]**

If this notion is not fully intelligible to us as a notion of beauty, there is at least this structural similarity. Like ‘our’ modern concept of beauty, the concept of beauty in antiquity is constantly contested. One influential dissent comes from female lyric poet Sappho of Mytilene (c. 630–c. 570 BCE), composing on the island of Lesbos. One poem begins by criticizing Homeric values under the banner of beauty: “Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot | and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing | on the black earth. But I say it is | what you love” (fr. 16.1–4).¹² The concept of beauty is here entirely changed in both content and structure. First, what men find beautiful is subsumed under the personal authority of a female lover: most beautiful, ‘I say,’ is what one loves. The assertion is quite general: the world of war is for men, too, a field of erotic attractions. But the speaker’s insistent ‘I’, second, personalizes the experience of beauty and explains what is (most) beautiful on this basis. To Helen’s desire for Paris the speaker compares her longing for her absent beloved, whose radiant face and movements she wishes to see far more than chariots and foot-soldiers (l.9 ff). The poem,

¹² Translations of Sappho belong to Carson 2003.

like much of Sappho's surviving poetry, illustrates the point that, if beauty is to be determined by a psychological response to a beloved, then the primary way to understand beauty is to analyze its effects from a first-personal perspective. This is why Sappho portrays intimately how love *feels* in time, its present pangs of sorrow, sweet memories, hopeful longings. Her often-imitated fragment 31, for instance, turns from the sight of a man who "seems to me equal to gods" to throw a jealous lover self-consciously back onto herself: "drumming fills ears | and cold sweat holds me and shaking | ... dead—or almost I seem to me." (fr. 31.9–12). Earlier scholars were tempted to take this self-conscious, assertive voice to express Sappho's own passions for women. But such personal expressions are less certainly biographical facts than attempts to reclaim through public performance the private space of women against dominant cultural values (Winkler 1990: ch. 6; Kurke 2007: 158–68). Who defines beauty, and how, is crucial to this political contest.

Nonetheless, the Homeric idea that physical beauty reflects high social status and ethical worth sets the pattern of reflection in ancient Greece and Rome. Centuries later in the first-century CE, a character in Chariton's Greek novel *Callirhoe* still expects only a free person to have a beautiful body (2.1.5), and as late as 377 CE the statesman and rhetorician Themistius exclaims that the beauty (*kallos*) of the young Roman emperor Gratian could render even a barbarian beautiful (*kalos*, 13.166c).¹³ This pattern emerges, of course, from elite authors. But it is not automatic. It begins with a defensive attempt by aristocrats in sixth-century BCE Greece to elevate themselves above wealthy lower classes by cultivating a luxurious lifestyle meant to display what it is to be 'beautiful-and-good' or 'splendid-and-upright.' This is original role of the ideal of the

¹³ On beauty in ancient Greek novels, see Tarrant 2000; in Themistius' *On Royal Beauty*, see Konstan 2014: 128–34.

kalos kagathos, a gentleman whose excellent character is expressed through his attractive physique, graceful habits, and participation in cultured activities, such as donning a Persian parasol or drinking with his peers at a symposium, a male aristocratic drinking party [Fig. 1.3 NEAR HERE] (Donlan 1973; Kurke 1992). This is the agonistic sociopolitical context in which we should place not only Sappho's poetry but also the many drinking songs that rank beauty among the greatest goods in life, even second-best next to health (*Poetae Melici Graeci* fr. 890). In this context also belong the odes composed by lyric poet Pindar (c. 518–438 BCE) in honour of victorious athletes, which link their beauty to virtue in terms of strength (*Isthmian* 7.22), youth (*Olympian* 9.94), manliness (*Nemean* 3.19–20) and, of course, their accomplishment of glorious deeds that his own beautiful poetry is meant to 'mirror' and immortalize (6.28–30; 7.14–6).

One question forced by these conceptual movements is whether beauty is a product of fortune or cultivation, good luck or good character. Aristocrats could help themselves to both answers. On the one hand, they could restrict beauty to their birth right. But this thought risks pulling beauty in the opposite direction as virtue, which demands intentional action. Even the disaffected aristocrat personified in the sixth-century BCE poetry attributed to Theognis laments that beauty and virtue have come apart, now both falling to but a happy few (ll. 933–4). By the time we come to Aristotle (384–322 BCE), it is somewhat commonplace to consider physical beauty a good 'external' to the soul and its activity, albeit one without which it is harder to live well (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a3–b4; cf. Plato, *Philebus* 265b; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.2.34). However, physical beauty more usually carries psychological significance as the result of voluntary effort. The paradigm is athletics. While some beauty contests, the *kallisteia*, may have involved little more than posing, in contests of manliness (*euandria*) or fitness (*euexia*) and athletics more generally, strength, speed, size, and well-proportioned muscles still signify virtues,

such as courage or self-control, needed to sculpt and train the body in specific ways (Athenaeus 565f, 609f–10b; Crowther 1985; Gherchanoc 2016). Here, on the other hand too, aristocrats could invoke self-serving standards. These virtues are expected of *free* citizens and, to embody them, one needs *leisure* to work out at the gymnasium. The idea that athletic beauty concerns virtuous character long endures in classical Greek ethical philosophy and Roman philosophical reflection on gladiatorial games (Scanlon 2002: 205; Reid 2011).

2. From Classical Greece to Imperial Rome

The ideas of beauty surveyed so far suffuse and shape social, political, and intellectual life in classical Greece. But the rise of philosophy introduces new questions and problems. The streak of continuity is particularly visible in the comedies of Aristophanes (c. 446–c. 386 BCE), since their humour depends on airing, though also challenging, cultural norms before a broad democratic audience. There we continue to find social and ethical meanings of beautiful bodies. Attractive young women have attention paid to tender breasts and fair skin; this last is a sign of a respectable aristocratic life spent indoors. For young men, it is broad chests and shoulders, large buttocks, and complexions bright from exercise, not pale from too much studying inside. Tall stature signifies high status. Small genitals, a notable feature of classical Greek sculpture (see ahead to Fig. 1.4), reflects a modest sexual appetite, not the size of one's anatomy, real or ideal (Aristophanes, *Clouds* 1010–19; Robson 2013). At the same time, amidst this continuity, classical Greek philosophers transform the concept of beauty in ways that become decisive for the history of thinking about beauty in the west. None is more influential or innovative in this regard than Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE). While preserving the link between beauty and virtue, Plato argues that both are based not on social status but on a new picture of a good human life and its relation to a divine metaphysical order.

Throughout the Platonic dialogues, an encounter with human beauty is a first and often necessary step in learning to live well. Frequently Plato's character Socrates—modeled on the historical figure sentenced to death by the Athenian democracy in 399 BCE—engages handsome young men to inquire into values, such as moderation (*Charmides*) or friendship (*Lysis*). Their beauty is taken to bear the promise of intellectual virtue. This is a twist on and critique of the convention of aristocratic men courting adolescent males with a supposed view to their civic education. More significant than how Plato dramatizes a life of philosophy, however, is how he conceives of it. Love of wisdom (*philosophia*) is itself an erotic love of beauty. To awaken this love, in the *Republic*, children must be raised to admire and emulate the beauty of a virtuous person. Such a person, Socrates suggests, exudes gracefulness and order in habits, speech, and body, “the most beautiful sight for anyone who can see” (*Republic* 402d). This sensibility needs to be educated, and rationality nurtured, by being socialized into a beautiful culture that shapes one's sense of what a good life looks like (400e–3a; Richardson Lear 2006). Beauty is not merely the start, but a means and an end of philosophical progress toward virtue and knowledge. Philosophers love everything beautiful, primarily the non-sensible ‘form’ of beauty, the divine order of which they strive to emulate (*Republic* 475e–6c, 500a–b). Plato's *Symposium* complements this account with fuller emphasis on human beauty. The sight of a beautiful person, whether in body or in soul, inspires our various attempts to become happy and perfect our imperfect human nature (*Symposium* 205a–9e, 215e–17a). If inquisitive and led aright, one proceeds from being attracted to one beautiful body, then all beautiful bodies, to caring more for a beloved's character or soul. One is perhaps led to wonder: what makes people better and more beautiful? It is sound political practices, bodies of knowledge and, ultimately, virtue achieved

through the contemplation of the nature of beauty itself (210a–12a).¹⁴ Beauty urges one to know more (Nehamas 2007).

Beautiful people, bodies, souls: how do these relate? Plato distinguishes human beings by having a soul—which makes living things alive—that is embodied as well as rational. So, a soul ruled by reason is, on the one hand, more beautiful and desirable than a beautiful body, indeed sometimes the cause of a beautiful body (*Republic* 402d, 410c–11e, 444d–e). Only with wisdom and the rest of virtue is bodily beauty beneficial (e.g., 491c, 591b, 618c–d). On the other hand, despite this distinction, Plato does not reject but radically *reforms* the aristocratic idea that a beautiful body complements and manifests a beautiful soul (*Charmides* 154d). A horrible person may (initially) seem attractive, like the stunning yet arrogant statesman Alcibiades, whose tormented love of Socrates all but closes the *Symposium*. But Plato would agree with his contemporary Xenophon that the beauty of virtue “shows through” (*diaphainei*, *Memorabilia* 3.10.5) bodily actions, rhythms, and postures.¹⁵ Beauty of soul is publicly visible, not some mysterious ‘inner’ quality. To see this beauty may not be easy, as Aristotle says in his qualified defence of natural slavery, though he too assumes its natural index is a beautiful body (*Politics* 1254b27–39). This shared assumption helps to explain why Plato’s most sustained discussion of beauty turns on the whole psychosomatic experience of persons in love.

¹⁴ For the many controversies about this passage, see Price 1989: ch. 2, Sheffield 2006: chs. 4–5, and Destrée and Giannopoulou 2017.

¹⁵ Despite Alcibiades’ portrait of an ugly Socrates within beautiful speeches ‘on the inside’ (*Symposium* 215a–b). See, recently, Boys-Stones 2019.

According to Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, human beauty can uniquely manifest the divine order of reality and reorient how one lives. Of all values, beauty alone is radiant, making its appearance immediately manifest in beautiful things. A “godlike” (*theoeides*) face or body that reflects beauty well is therefore for a philosophical initiate an awesome sight: like a devotional statue (*agalma*), the divine presents itself to human awareness (*Phaedrus* 250d–1a). This sight reveals both a glimpse of beauty itself—in which beautiful faces, people, deeds, and other things ‘participate’—and the fact that human nature shares in the divine, above all by sharing rational capacities to grasp truth and live accordingly. Few enjoy this revelatory experience. Yet it can inspire one to make oneself and one’s beloved as godlike as possible by pursuing, through a friendship (*philia*) at once erotic and intellectual, the beauty of wisdom and a philosophical life (252d–3b, 255b–6b).¹⁶ As in epic and archaic poetry, beauty likens human beings to immortal gods. Unlike earlier, for Plato, this way lies happiness.

This picture assumes a still closer connection between beauty and goodness (*Hippias Major* 296e–7a; *Meno* 77b; *Philebus* 66a–b; *Laws* 841c). Yet Plato distinguishes these values, especially in the psychology of beauty (Barney 2010; Fine 2020), and he resists reducing beauty to some other value or property, whether pleasure, harmony, unity, or appropriateness. To generalize somewhat, the Platonic dialogues explore facets of the concept yet settle on no definition.¹⁷ This overall approach suggests a conviction that brings together the rival poles struck

¹⁶ Excellent studies of these themes include Ferrari 1987: ch. 6, Price 1989: ch. 3, and Richardson Lear 2019.

¹⁷ At *Phaedo* 100d, Socrates ventures only the ‘safe’ answer that the ‘form of beauty’ makes beautiful things beautiful.

by Homer and Sappho: beauty is a real feature of things independent of the human mind, but it cannot be fully comprehended without analyzing what it is like to find someone or something beautiful. Both aspects of this idea become quite contentious later in the history of western aesthetics. In antiquity, few deny the former. But some pressure on the latter may already be felt in Stoicism.

In what is arguably the first philosophical theory of beauty, the Stoics define beauty as *summetria*, proportion or what came later to be called ‘symmetry.’ Proportion had long been associated with beauty, as had related concepts such as appropriateness (Greek *to prepon*; Latin *decorum*) and order (*taxis*; *ordo*). Homeric heroes look ugly when they take more than their fair share. Plato, perhaps influenced by Pythagoreans, calls people and things beautiful when well-proportioned and measured (*Timaeus* 69b, 87d–e; *Philebus* 64e; *Sophist* 235e–6a). Aristotle lists proportion among the main sources of beauty (*Metaphysics* 1078a31–b2; *Poetics* 1450b36; *Topics* 116b21; *Politics* 1326a33), which may explain why he rates the bodies of pentathletes, trained for speed and strength, most beautiful (*Rhetoric* 1361b3–12). Yet the Stoics make proportion necessary and sufficient for beauty. (Cicero adds pleasant color to the definition: *Tusculan Disputations* 4.31.) The Stoics mean to explain the beauty of anything—indeed, everything, the cosmos—but they take their cue from the human case. Their definition follows the *Canon* of the classical Greek sculptor Polyclitus (c. 450 BCE), according to which beauty and perfection in sculptures of the human form derive from proportions of body parts to one another and to the whole body, of finger to finger, finger to hand, hand to forearm, and so forth. So at least the third head of the Stoic school, Chrysippus (c. 279–c. 206 BCE), seems to have understood the sculptor (Galen, *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* 5.448). Polyclitus’ artistic principle remains obscure, as surviving copies of the sculpture that exemplified it, the *Spearbearer* (*Doryphoros*),

have different proportions and suggest a notion of symmetry as counterbalanced forces. In a famous Roman copy (see Fig. 2.4), the young hero or warrior-athlete holds a spear (now lost) in his bent left arm, balanced by his straight, weight-bearing right leg just as his bent left leg is balanced by his relaxed right arm. The fact that the feet are too big for walking and real bodies have no sexy ‘athlete’s girdle’ where the torso meets the hip suggests that representational and mathematical exactness may have been secondary in practice, if not always in theory, to the aim of arousing desire and wonder in spectators (Neer 2010: 151–2).

The Stoic theory, however, concentrates less on what beauty does than on the claim that beauty consists in certain relations between parts of a structured whole. A common analogy is health. Health comes from a balance of elements, the hot, cold, wet, and dry. So bodily beauty comes from a good arrangement of limbs and the beauty of a wise person’s soul comes from a coherent and stable set of beliefs (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.13.301; Arius Didymus 5b4–5; Stobaeus, *Anthology* 2.7.5, 2.62.15–63.5). For the Stoics, these two orders of beauty are continuous with one another. One whose mind accords with the rational order of nature will act with an appropriateness or seemliness (*decorum*) that, Cicero states, arouses others’ esteem (*On Duties* 1.27.98). This has two implications. First, personal beauty can still literally be seen in bodily movements and postures, for example a calm face. Second, a beautiful body is something worth cultivating, only not as a priority or a matter of fancy curls (*Fragments of the Early Stoics* 1.248; Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.1.42–3; Seneca, *Letter* 124.22). It complicates both points that the Stoics suggest that, properly understood, human beauty is a quality of a soul that is quite distinct from ‘external’ things like the body itself. In a delicate position, beauty of the body follows upon yet easily distracts from the superior beauty of virtue (Bett 2010; Celkyte 2017).

Amid these continuities with classical Greek thought, Roman philosophers influenced by Stoicism place less accent than did their predecessors on the aesthetic character of virtue. Shifts from Greek to Latin are telling. While Cicero (106–43 BCE) finds good conduct attractive, he translates *kalos* in ethical contexts by *honestum*, ‘honorable,’ rather than *pulcher*, *formosus*, or *speciosus*, varieties of ‘beautiful’ (on these terms, see Monteil 1964). In Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE), the Greek ideal of the *kalos kagathos* becomes simply the Roman ‘good man’ (*vir bonus*). The beauty (*pulchritudo*) of such a man’s soul *would* be amazing, (again) like the appearance of a god, Seneca states, *if* the soul *could* be seen (*Letter* 115.3–5). These choices render the beauty of virtue less ‘superficial,’ less a matter of appearance. This tendency may be a result of Stoic psychology or a reaction to the spectacles of the games and politics of the late Roman republic; very plausibly, it is both intertwined (Bartsch 1999). However these translations arise, they inflect later Roman thought and the interpretation of ancient Greek ethics to even this day (Setaioli 2008).

Not all Roman thinkers accept these philosophical transfers of beauty from body to soul. Two premier writers of Roman epigrams in the first-century BCE suggest a more popular perspective. Consider one epigram of Philodemus of Gadara (present-day Jordan), an early follower of the Epicurean philosophical school that sought happiness in simple pleasure, or the removal of pain. The poem revels in the body parts of a young Italian woman from bottom to top: “Oh feet, oh calves... oh upper arms, oh breasts, oh the tapering neck, oh hands, oh—and I’m going mad—the eyes...” (*Greek Anthology* 5.132.1–4). This reaction has nothing to do with her origin, character, or refinement. “What if she is of Oscan origin,” the man wonders (l. 7): she may not

even speak Latin or Greek!¹⁸ Catullus (84–54 BCE) rejects a similar view of the many who judge one Quintia beautiful (*formosa*) on account of physical features alone. Her body is great (*tam magno corpore*), he concedes, she is fair-skinned, tall, and upright—all connoting nobility—but to be *beautiful* a woman needs charm and wit, like his beloved Lesbia (*venustas, sal*; fr. 86).¹⁹ Two centuries later, David Konstan has argued (2014: 109–10), the concept of beauty still shifts unstably among body and soul even as intellectuals praise its psychological reaches against the tide of common use. But the concept has settled more squarely onto women. Cynic philosopher Dio Chrysotom, exiled in 82 CE from Rome and his birthplace in modern Turkey, might explain this conceptual fate by the twinned loss of handsome men and Greek values under the reign of Domitian (*Oration* 21.4–10).²⁰

3. Later Antiquity

Thinkers in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries CE ring significant changes on classical and Hellenistic notions of beauty. A prevalent tendency is to modify ideas of Plato's, as interpreted

¹⁸ This view resonates with the Epicurean view that everything is corporeal, though it is difficult to know how or whether to interpret many of Philodemus' epigrams in terms of his philosophical commitments. See Sider 1997: 32–9, 103–8. Cohen 1981 traces the head-to-toe description of Sarai (Sarah) in the *Genesis Apocryphon*, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, to the influence of this epigram and both, in turn, to Near Eastern figurative descriptions of body parts, known to scholars by the Arabic *wasf*.

¹⁹ Compare Catullus fr. 51 on Lesbia, modelled after Sappho fr. 31 noted above.

²⁰ Greek, that is, as opposed to Persian. On cultural difference, see the contribution of Kelly Olson to this volume.

and defended by his Platonist exponents, to support new conceptions of humanity and the divine afforded by Christianity. Judaic thinkers, such as Philo of Alexandria, had similarly drawn on Greco-Roman philosophy; medieval Islamic thinkers will do the same. Early Christian thinkers find in Platonism an amenable theological framework. In their view, the aim of human happiness remains to become godlike, but this becomes a matter of imitating Christ so that one can see the image of God in the beauty of Christ and in oneself. The crucial bridge between these two intellectual traditions, and arguably the first to make this turn toward 'inner beauty,' is Plotinus.

Born in Egypt in 204/5 CE, a student at Alexandria and teacher at Rome, Plotinus describes in *On Beauty* (*Ennead* 1.6) how beauty in the world draws one toward the ultimate non-physical basis of reality and of one's true nature. Like anything in the world, physical beauty is an image of what Plotinus calls a form located in intellect; this is what makes individual things intelligible. But physical beauty presents what it is an image of, much as your reflection in water shows you are there, too. Any beautiful body has form, but a beautiful human body has a particularly lively quality that shows the presence of soul (6.7.22). We are attracted and delighted because our soul, which also has form, recognizes something akin (1.6.2). Already this view departs from Stoicism in two ways. The first is that form is simple, not composite, so its beauty cannot depend upon proportions among parts and wholes. This is why, according to Plotinus, Stoics cannot explain what makes many things beautiful, from gold and the stars to virtue and knowledge (1.6.1). The second is that Plotinus begins from the motivational role of beauty. He recovers from Plato a psychological concern with "how beauty works in attentive experience" (Miles 1999: 105) yet develops this psychology through a novel view of what it means to be a beautiful person and how one achieves this ethical ideal. The goal becomes to understand the cause of everything and all beauty, the One or the Good (*Ennead* 1.6.7). The way to do this is to look 'within' oneself. One

must not pursue physical beauty unaware that it is an image. This would be, as in Ovid's myth of Narcissus, like chasing one's beautiful reflection in water (1.6.8). Rather, one must see the beauty of a good soul. How does one do that? Plato found this sight in lovers' awestruck gazes. While invoking the *Phaedrus*, Plotinus interiorizes the exercise in a way that Plato could not:

Go back into yourself [*anage epi sauton*] and look; and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as a maker of a statue [an *agalma*] that must become beautiful cuts away here and polishes there... so you must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright and never stop 'working on your statue' until the godlike [*theoeidēs*] gleam of virtue shines upon you, until you see 'self-control standing on its sacred pedestal.' (1.6.9, partially quoting *Phaedrus* 252d, 254b)

Notice the language of removal. Plotinus advises this work of purification to separate oneself from one's embodied condition as a human being and to identify oneself so far as possible with one's true nature as intellect. To call this an ideal of *human* beauty is nonetheless useful, if slightly misleading, because Plotinus is interested in the tension of living rationally in the world and appreciating its value and beauty.²¹

This position emerges against both Gnostic and early Christian views of the human situation. With origins in Judaic and early Christian sects, Gnosticism shares a belief in a transcendent and caring God but takes this to exclude that essential Christian belief in the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth. By the second century, Gnostics are treated as heretical Christians. Plotinus treats them as perverted Platonists. The reason is that Gnostic writings,

²¹ On the status of sensible beauty, contrast the perspectives of Dillon 1996 and Miles 1999: ch. 2. Corrigan 2018 traces themes above from Plato to Platonism.

excavated in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, claim that the physical world is the evil creation of an evil lesser deity entirely separate from God. This dichotomy opposes an ancient philosophical conviction that the cosmos is structured for good and produces the uniquely harsh position that human beauty is devious and despicable (Nag Hammadi Codex 1.1, 1.3, 2.5, 2.7).²² In Plotinus' view, this dichotomy ignores the structure of reality (*Ennead* 2.9.17). For early Christians it ignores the revelation of God in Christ and, related, the need to affirm the body and bodily suffering. What links these tenets is the doctrine of resurrection, itself a fertile ground for imagining and reimagining human beauty.

Early Christian thinking is oriented from the narrative that Jesus of Nazareth was born, crucified, and resurrected three days later.²³ That he was born makes him human; that he was resurrected makes Christ divine, God incarnate. This requires a new trinitarian way of thinking about the unity of God, as the fourth-century bishop Hilary of Poitiers recognizes in *The Trinity* around 360 CE. It also requires a new way of thinking about human beings and human ideals. As emphasized by Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215 CE) and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395 CE), human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). While this image pertains to the soul, a soul without a body is not a person; Christ is, after all, God in the flesh. So, already with the Apostle's Creed, an early doctrinal statement, the hope for after death is not that the soul will be immortal, as in much ancient Greek thought, but that the *body* of a particular person, *my body*, will be resurrected together with the soul at the end of time. But for

²² An excellent introduction to Gnosticism is Pagels 1979.

²³ I have been especially helped in what follows by Wilken 2003. See also the sources collected in Thiessen 2005. A seminal study of these sources is Balthasar 1982.

centuries, early Christians debate what this implies. Which body will be resurrected? Will it be me at thirty or at eighty? As I hoped to look or with marks of imperfection? Will I need all my teeth? Or will I look gross without them?

Such questions involve projecting a beautiful future self. Older notions of beauty could furnish answers. Some carry by now familiar socioeconomic weight. A body clothed in white robes, for example, conjures purity and cleanliness but also upper-class virtue (Moss 2019: ch. 4). [Fig. 1.4 NEAR HERE] Others are more theoretical. In the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) invokes the Stoics to argue that fat and thin people need not fear that they will be resurrected as they are because the resurrected body, being perfect, is beautiful and physical beauty depends on a well-proportioned body and a nice complexion. But Augustine goes on to add something which we have not yet met, and it is distinctive of early Christian thought. Persecuted martyrs, he continues, will be resurrected complete with the scars of their wounds. Far from ugly, in those scars “the beauty of their valor will shine out, a beauty *in* the body and yet not *of* the body” (*City of God* 22.19). In this the martyrs imitate Christ, who becomes glorified through suffering, his ‘passion’ on the crucifix.²⁴ This is not the glory of Achilles, nor Virgil’s Aeneas. When Christian poet Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348– c. 413 CE) praises the victory of the passion (*tropaeum passionis*), with blood and water miraculously flowing from Christ’s pierced side (*Hymn for Every Hour* 83–7 with John 19:34), martial valor is molded into quite a different cast of beautiful character.

²⁴ Cyril of Alexandria observes that Christ can become glorified only as a human being who suffers and overcomes death (*Commentary on John* 13:31–2).

The basic idea is, as before, that one becomes like what one loves. But now, if Christ is fully human *and* fully divine, his exemplary beauty does not so much point toward or share in God's beauty as realize it. This thought, which encourages physical contact with icons of Christ, bridges the gap between human and divine in Greek poetry and philosophy and, more sharply, in Gnosticism.²⁵ [Fig. 1.5 NEAR HERE] It diverges also from the Hebrew Bible, in which the adjective corresponding to *beautiful*, *yapheh* (יָפֵה), is used centrally for human beings and especially their eyes, hair, skin, and flawless bodies (Olyan 2008: ch. 1; Penchansky 2013).²⁶ In the Christian context, the question becomes why one must become like Christ to become beautiful, if one is already made in his image? The answer, in a word, is sin. Like a face depicted on a dirty coin, the image of God in us has been obscured; the soul, like the coin, must be cleaned both to see the image and to become beautiful. These two outcomes come together, as Augustine makes clear. While Augustine's views of beauty evolve and owe debts to Stoicism and Platonism, his mature Christian thought follows a general structure (Harrison 1992).²⁷ Human beauty (*formosa*) derives from the image, the being or form (*forma*), of God. Therefore, to turn one's will away from God is a disgrace (*deformatio*) whose repair (*reformatio*) consists in redirecting love primarily

²⁵ This necessarily simplifies debates about incarnation, image, and iconography. See Schönborn 1994.

²⁶ One of the most intriguing sources is the *Song of Songs*. On the relation there of beauty to dark skin (1:5) and its early Christian reception, see Scott 2006. Konstan 2014: 136–47, to whom I owe the reference to Olyan 2008, triangulates the biblical Hebrew terms with their Greek and Latin translations.

²⁷ A comprehensive study in French is Fontanier 2008.

toward God. Augustine is deeply ambivalent whether the beauties of creation, including another person, can provoke this conversion. A surer path, following Plotinus, is to turn inward to seek beauty within and come to know oneself (*Confessions* 7.17.23, 10.6.8–10). Otherwise, one cannot properly see even the beauty of another. The suffering of Christ is again paradigmatic. Whereas his executioners think him corrupt and disgrace his body because *their* souls are disgraceful, those confirmed in Christ see the beauty of his righteousness (*Expositions on the Psalms* 32.2, 44.3). Not only must one look with loving attention to see beauty clearly; but such a love makes one beautiful for Augustine. If this ideal cannot be fully attained until the resurrection in the afterlife, in this life beauty beckons one to see, to know, to love more truly.

4. Conclusion

Throughout antiquity ideas of human beauty are ethical ideals to which human beings should aspire. This chapter has presented some ways these ideals change from archaic Greek poetry to early Christianity along three central axes: the nature of beauty between body and soul, its value in relation to virtue and happiness, and its role in connecting human beings with reality and the divine. These changes are enmeshed within philosophical debates about human nature and flourishing but also political struggles concerning sex, gender, class, and religion. From Homeric heroes and Sappho's poetry, to the *kalos kagathos* and the Stoic sage, to Platonist and early Christian ethics, the ideas above may seem at turns alien or strangely familiar to modern notions of beauty. Abstract ideas may not capture all that beauty means for us. In which case we might take heart in the words of Augustine: "Give me a lover and he will feel what I am saying" (*Tractates on the Gospel of John* 26.4).