

Bodies, Functions, and Imperfections

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Identification of bodily aesthetic imperfections tends to do harm. Fat bodies, visibly disabled bodies, and elderly bodies are treated as incorrigibly imperfect, and those thus embodied are admonished to cover or conceal their bodily imperfections. Fat people and those with unusual facial or body morphology are often treated as though their presence in public space, or their very existence, is an affront (Frazier, 'Beauty Labor'; Wendell, *Rejected Body*, 64-5). Tobin Siebers relays the childhood experience of Diane DeVries, who was born without arms or legs, of being threatened with decapitation by another child and notes that 'observers of the disabled body often feel compelled to fly into action, to cure or kill the ungainly sight before their eyes' (Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 62). Siebers argues that aesthetics is often used in the service of *disqualification*, 'a symbolic process [that] removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death' (23).

In a capitalist society, we—especially those gendered as girls and women—are encouraged to engage in constant self-surveillance, monitoring our bodies for the emergence of imperfections and taking costly, time-consuming, and sometimes harmful actions to prevent, eliminate or conceal them (Saito, 'The Role of Imperfection'). As Susan Wendell notes:

Physical 'imperfection' is more likely to be thought to 'spoil' a woman than a man by rendering her unattractive in a culture where her physical appearance is a large component of a woman's value ... (Wendell, *Rejected Body*, 43-4)

Racial hierarchy often functions in part by defining certain bodily features, such as skin colour or facial morphology, as imperfections, sometimes deploying a postulated connection to disability (Hobson, 'The "Batty" Politic'). We are sophisticated detectors of others' responses to our appearance, and the prospect or reality of having some feature identified as an imperfection triggers shame that may impede our ability to navigate comfortably and function effectively in society. A wide variety of social goods, including employment, education, health care, treatment in the carceral system, and even displays of parental love, are distributed in accordance with judgments about bodily attractiveness, which helps to scaffold hierarchies based on race, gender, fatness, LGBTQ identities, and disability (Irvin, 'Resisting').

How might we respond to these observations? First, we might do our best to abandon aesthetic assessment of bodies, on the grounds that a person's dignity and worth are independent of the conditions of their embodiment. While I agree that the distribution of social and economic goods and our respect for others' humanity should be independent of aesthetic considerations, I hope to find a way to reframe rather than abandon aesthetic encounters with bodies.

Aesthetically encountering each other's embodiment, and experiencing others' appreciative regard, can be a deeply rewarding and humanizing aspect of life (Garland-Thomson, *Staring*). An ethical approach to such encounters is worth seeking.

A second approach is positive aesthetics of the body, which holds that bodies are rightly understood as having only positive aesthetic affordances and no imperfections. This approach, however, may not adequately respect people's experiences of their own bodies. There may be legitimate reasons, associated with one's self-conception as an embodied agent rather than with mechanisms of social control, to identify a feature of one's body as an aesthetic imperfection.

Moreover, some are sceptical that reshaping our tastes in bodies to recognize only positive aesthetic value is feasible (Parsons, ‘Merrickites’).

I will therefore explore a third approach: a respectful way of aesthetically appreciating bodies that acknowledges aesthetic imperfections but without bolstering social stratification and other harms. I will start from the obvious fact that our bodies are a principal instrument of our agency: our ability to do the things we care about depends on a body whose features and functionality support our projects. In *Functional Beauty*, Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson propose functional aesthetics as a unified approach to aesthetic assessment of a wide variety of entities that treats them respectfully by acknowledging them as the kinds of things that they are. I will argue that a form of functional aesthetic assessment rather different from that deployed by Parsons and Carlson may be fruitfully applied to human bodies.

1. Functional Aesthetics

In *Functional Beauty*, Parsons and Carlson put forward functional aesthetics as an approach to aesthetic assessment of diverse objects including artworks, non-art artifacts, buildings, and organic and inorganic entities in nature. They argue that attending to function allows us to detect three kinds of aesthetic merit. First, an object may ‘look fit’: perception may reveal features that suit its function well and no features that apparently undermine that function. Second, the object may exhibit ‘simplicity, gracefulness, or elegance’ by having the features essential to its function with a minimum of extraneous ones. Third, the object may exhibit a ‘pleasing dissonance’ or ‘visual tension’ by appearing able to perform its function while nonetheless possessing a surprising feature that one would expect to interfere with that function (158). For instance, they suggest that construction cranes ‘frequently have a sort of surprising, vibrant look’ because the crane arm is so narrow at its base that it looks like it may break, though we know it is in fact very strong (99).

To make appropriate functional aesthetic assessments, we must attend to the object’s relevant functions. For most kinds of objects, aesthetic assessment is related to *proper function*. The proper function of a biological organ is the function for which that organ and its features were evolutionarily selected: the proper function of the eye is to see. For human-created artifacts, Parsons and Carlson offer the following account, drawing on the work of Beth Preston:

X has a *proper function* F if and only if Xs currently exist because, in the recent past, ancestors of X were successful in meeting some need or want in the marketplace because they performed F, leading to manufacture and distribution, or preservation, of Xs. (148)

The proper function of shovels is to dig: even if they can be used in a pinch to prop open doors, shovels have been produced and distributed for the former rather than the latter function. Proper function may evolve if the community’s reasons for creating and preserving a type of entity changes. We may now preserve ruins because we value their expressiveness, though they were initially created and maintained for architectural functions they no longer serve (164).

Parsons and Carlson acknowledge that identifying proper functions can be complex. While religious art and memorials have rather straightforward proper functions, theorists disagree about which functions explain our choices to create, distribute, and preserve art more generally. Disputes may arise, likewise, over the proper functions of buildings. Is the function of an opera house merely to provide an optimal venue for opera performances, or might it also have the proper function of serving other community needs, as with the Oslo opera house that serves as a valued landmark and site for outdoor activities? If the latter function explains why resources are

allocated for the construction and preservation of such buildings, then it seems to be part of the building's proper function (85–6).

The functional aesthetic value of inorganic natural entities, Parsons and Carlson suggest, requires a different account. Inorganic entities often serve functions within the systems of which they are a part. A rock formation may serve as a windbreak, preventing soil erosion and facilitating the growth of plants. However, this is not its *proper* function; it is merely a causal role function it happens to be serving in a system at a given time. The rock formation's features are not explained by its serving this function: it did not evolve to serve the function, nor was it created to serve it. Parsons and Carlson suggest that because the rock formation does not have a proper function, it can never appear defective by failing to perform a function: if it ceases to perform that function, the function becomes irrelevant. Parsons and Carlson suggest that positive aesthetics, the thesis that everything has positive aesthetic value, has a grain of truth when it comes to the functional aesthetics of inorganic nature, since inorganic objects can't be functionally ugly or imperfect (133–4).

As James Kirwan notes, simply performing its function impeccably is unlikely to make an object stand out as perfect; functional aesthetic perfection seems to be a matter of the object's '[doing] its job *beautifully*' (Kirwan, 'Everyday Encounters'), perhaps by exhibiting an uncommon harmony of features and function. Functional aesthetic imperfection inheres in features that manifestly undermine the object's ability to perform its function. A rickety chair is aesthetically imperfect because it appears unable to hold the sitter safely and stably. The same pattern of clumps that are lovely in a forest moss are an aesthetic imperfection in a mattress, since they promise to interfere with comfortable sleep.

Parsons and Carlson argue that aesthetic appreciation tied to function is morally preferable to attending only to sensory surface. The former takes the entity seriously as the kind of thing it is, whereas the latter seems to treat it as a mere instrument for the viewer's aesthetic experience. However, Parsons and Carlson do not offer an account of functional aesthetic appreciation of the human body. I will attempt to use the resources they provide to construct an account that is both aesthetically and morally adequate. As we will see, treating people respectfully involves seeing them as having extensive latitude to determine their bodies' functions, sometimes idiosyncratically. We must also recognize the aesthetic importance of the *way* a person chooses to use their body to achieve those functions.

2. Bodies as Organisms?

Might we treat human bodies as Parsons and Carlson treat living organisms, making aesthetic assessments related to evolutionarily selected functions? We encounter a problem immediately: on this approach, many bodies exhibiting visible disability will be functionally ugly because some of their parts appear unsuited to perform the functions for which they were evolutionarily selected. Parsons and Carlson state:

the aesthetic displeasure that we take in a diseased, malformed, or damaged organism is displeasure in its apparent dysfunctionality: in its 'looking unfit'.... [I]t appears that what is displeasing *aesthetically* about such creatures is precisely that their parts and limbs appear manifestly incapable of doing what they are supposed to do. (132)

Aging bodies, too, will appear ugly on this account. As we age, our body parts become less adept at performing the functions for which they were evolutionarily selected. Aesthetic assessment in relation to the proper function of body parts seems to trap us in a model whereby disabled bodies and old bodies are rife with aesthetic imperfections, contributing to stigmatization and hierarchy.

The trouble is not limited to aging and disability. In tying aesthetic assessment to evolutionarily selected proper functions, this account would disregard the agent's autonomy in determining whether a function is relevant to them. While some bodily features were evolutionarily selected for purposes related to reproduction, reproduction might have no part in my own plans, priorities, or self-conception, or it may have only a limited role for a small portion of my lifespan. Parsons and Carlson's own remarks suggest that this is a problem, since 'women, indeed all persons, are intellectual, moral, and emotional beings, autonomous agents with a rich range of plans, priorities, and projects' (117). They note that 'treating another being as an object of aesthetic appreciation is itself a ... morally evaluable action' (118) and that treating things according to their actual nature is morally preferable in aesthetic assessment as in other forms of engagement. A morally appropriate, respectful form of functional aesthetic assessment that does not dehumanize, then, involves treating persons as embodied autonomous agents with plans and projects.

Functional aesthetic assessment related to the body's status as an organism does not satisfy this requirement. While it may acknowledge the organism as 'as a creature with plans, priorities, and projects, insofar as it involves considering the functions of animal traits and parts', this amounts to treating it only as a member of a species and not as an individual whose plans, priorities, and projects may diverge from those of the group (121). Whether or not this approach is morally adequate for the aesthetic assessment of non-human organisms, it won't do for embodied persons considered as autonomous agents.

3. Bodies as Artifacts?

Might human bodies be considered as, or as closely analogous to, artifacts? Bodies, after all, are things we adorn and modify in pursuit of our purposes, and thus might be eligible for the subcategory of artifacts that are appropriated for a purpose they were not created for.

The notion of artifactuality is appealing insofar as it introduces the ability of communities to define proper functions of the body that are not evolutionarily selected. Insofar as some features of the body may be cultivated in service of a function like performing ballet or swimming the 100-metre butterfly, it seems that these features could be valued as functionally beautiful, even if they would be considered imperfect on a functional aesthetic assessment not tied to these functions. Michael Phelps's long torso, short legs, and large feet are functionally beautiful in allowing him to move through water at great speed, though outside the context of swimming they might appear as aesthetic imperfections, disproportionate for common functions like ambulation on land. Similarly, the hypermobility of Misty Copeland's legs contributes to functional beauty because it facilitates balletic virtuosity, though hypermobility outside ballet may be perceived as an aesthetic imperfection because it appears to signal susceptibility to pain and injury.

There are, however, several complications. First, the body is profoundly multifunctional: we use it for many different functions, and the functions we value may shift with time and context. I use my body sometimes for sex, sometimes for running, sometimes for writing, sometimes for public speaking. The attributes that make it functional for one of these activities may be irrelevant to or even conflict with those that make it functional for another. And these functions need not—indeed, are unlikely to—remain static: we use our body in different ways and for different purposes throughout the lifespan. While this is not dispositive against treating bodies as artifacts, it does suggest that functional aesthetic assessment of bodies will require acknowledging fluidity and multiplicity of functions far beyond what is typical of artifacts.

Second, while a community may value a particular function and cultivate the bodily features that promote it, respect for my agency implies that it is up to me whether to embrace this function. Even if I am strong, fit, and unusually tall, the community does not get to decide that basketball is a proper function of my body. Nor need we accept community assignment of reproductive functions to particular bodies.

Third, even if I embrace a body function that is valued by a community, my conception of that function may differ from the community's in important ways. Proper function is relevant to aesthetic assessment because it implies standards for what it is to perform the function well. By including an inherent conception of the desired outputs and their attributes, proper function grounds judgments about whether the features of an entity will promote such outputs. Yet I may pursue an activity—dance, for instance—with different values and purposes than those typically adopted by the community, entailing that the function I have embraced requires aesthetic assessment by different standards.

Examples of practitioners using the framework of an existing community practice to pursue a different set of values are rife within the arts. Yvonne Rainer's choreography incorporating everyday movement, and John Cage's compositions using silence or aleatory sound, signal through their obvious abandonment of the values typically associated with dance and music that they are undertaking a related but different project, in which carefully constructed exquisite effects are not prioritized. As Parsons and Carlson note, it may be impossible to assign proper functions to such novel artworks, if they lack relevant ancestors to define a kind of thing to which they belong (225). But this does not imply that they have no functions, or that functional aesthetic assessment is irrelevant. As we saw in relation to inorganic nature, an entity can be assessed based on its role within a system without assigning it a proper function. Moreover, novel human artifacts or practices may have functions and associated values defined and signalled by their creators.

The upshot is that respect for my agency requires attention not just to the way my activity appears to manifest a proper function recognized by my community, but also to whether I embrace that function as the community conceives it. A dancer whose body is differently configured than most may choose to pursue a novel form of dance whose activities, internal values, and desired outputs differ from those recognized by the community. Rainer's practice, some of which references mobility limitation and other forms of disability, has inspired a movement of disability-oriented dance whose practitioners embrace forms of bodily particularity and idiosyncrasy that dance traditionally eschewed (Watlington, 'Crippling Choreography'). Disabled dancers may demonstrate, by producing awe and wonder in viewers, that aesthetic excellence is attainable through means other than those employed by established forms of dance, bearing out Siebers's observation that disability 'often serves as the very factor that establishes works as superior examples of aesthetic beauty' (Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 4).

Recognition of aesthetic perfection and imperfection requires correct attribution of functions to the body. Where functions are projected on to my body that I have not endorsed, my features may be misinterpreted as aesthetic imperfections when they are compatible with or even exemplary at promoting the functions I am in fact pursuing. Proper functions, then, cannot be assigned to bodies in the same way we assign them to more standard sorts of artifact; nor can aesthetic assessment proceed along the same lines. Despite the attributes bodies share with artifacts, they cannot be assimilated to artifacts for purposes of functional aesthetic assessment.

4. Bodies as Buildings?

These considerations lead me to what might seem a surprising suggestion: to consider the body as analogous to an architectural construction. Many buildings are multi-functional, serving different functions for different communities on different occasions. Different parts of the building may have different functions, and evolution in function over time is not uncommon.

Parsons and Carlson are sceptical that individual intentions determine proper function, attributing it instead to facts about the broader community's choices. But for buildings, regarding function as determined by local facts about individual use at a given time may sometimes be apt. I live in a region of the US where it is common for a defunct retail space to be reappropriated by an emerging religious community, resulting in an architectural phenomenon known as the strip mall church. While the space is serving as a church, it may make sense to apply functional aesthetic assessment related to the church function. Does the building evoke both welcome to all comers and reverence to the divine, and support the function of community gathering for worship? But that function does not seem to persist when the building ceases to be used as a church. It seems inapt, therefore, to assess a building that was once a strip mall church as, say, uninspiring for worship, based on the function it is no longer serving. This recalls Parsons and Carlson's observation that the causal-role functions of inorganic natural entities can become irrelevant when conditions change. On this analysis, the aesthetic relevance of a former function sometimes falls away when the function does, and the building cannot be functionally ugly by virtue of an aesthetic assessment tied to that function.

Another key point about functional aesthetic assessments of buildings, I suggest, is that they do and should consider the appropriative nature of our uses of buildings. When we make a functional aesthetic assessment of an active strip mall church, we don't compare it to the Sistine Chapel, or even to a modest, purpose-built church. We are interested to see how the community has worked around, or even capitalized on, the structural limitations that violate our expectations for church architecture and might seem to compromise the building's ability to serve standard church functions. The creative way the building serves the function now, in light of structural givens, becomes an object of functional aesthetic assessment.

Let us consider the kind of building that perhaps most closely approximates the body, namely, the home. The consensual function of a home is, roughly, to provide shelter for the activities of its residents and facilitate their comfort and safety in performing the activities of life, such as sleeping, eating, sex, leisure, and childcare. Often, a person or group seeking a home appropriates a house, a structure that is purpose-built to serve as a home. But once the house has been thus appropriated, its residents have a prerogative in determining its functions, and they can signal idiosyncratic functions in ways that allow us to apply functional aesthetic assessment. Even a kind of room that typically has a specific function may be appropriated to serve a different one. People living in large cities where homes are very small and prepared food options abundant might appropriate their kitchens for functions like storage or office space. We might, on finding books in an attractive arrangement inside the oven, judge them to exhibit 'pleasing visual tension' (in Parsons and Carlson's words) as we recognize the collision between the kitchen's current and usual functions.

Many of these observations apply equally to the functions of the body. Many structural aspects of my body are fixed, and I am not free to trade this body in for some other. But I can choose which functions I care about and decorate, clothe, and to some extent reshape my body to pursue them. Moreover, my choices may be responsive to my body structure and to my situation. If my body is structurally unsuited to performing some function—say, dance or swimming—in the way that many bodies perform it, I might choose to prioritize other functions; I might

embrace a related but distinct function, as described earlier; or I might develop a way of performing the communally accepted function that is fitted to the structure of my body (with or without structural modifications or adaptive devices), and even come to exhibit uncommon excellence at performing it.

The functions I care about and use my body to perform may change over time as my body, environment, and interests change. A person who once walked may come to get around by using a wheelchair. A person might come to care about and pursue new bodily functions by virtue of new opportunities—a skate park, a ceramics studio, a community swimming pool—and perhaps leave behind functions that previously mattered to them.

The functions of my body, then, are up to me and not fixed. While my body's functioning is constrained by its inherent physical structure, and my choices about which functions to prioritize may be affected by my community and the roles I play within it, as an agent I can decide how to incorporate those influences within my choices about what to use my body for.

5. Bodies, Functions, and Imperfections

On the picture I have offered, the functions of the body are not proper functions in the sense Parsons and Carlson offer for organisms or artifacts. Of course, body parts do have evolutionarily selected proper functions, but taking me seriously as an agent, and aesthetically assessing my body in a way that is not dehumanizing, means recognizing that what my body is for, ultimately, is up to me. I may be indifferent to functions like reproduction while investing deeply in functions that are uncommon, like playing the banjo, or historically stigmatized, like participating in BDSM.

Of course, once we have identified the functions an agent has chosen for their body, there will still be structural constraints on how those functions can be performed by that body. This is true of all of us, of course, but some structural constraints stand out as unusual and may prevent one from performing a function in a way that is typical for many bodies. Should these structural constraints be identified as imperfections?

At this point we must foreground the *way in which* the function is performed. Functional aesthetic assessment is not merely a matter of fit between knowledge of an object's function and the appearance of its structure as being able or unable to perform that function simpliciter. An object performs a function in a particular way, and functional aesthetic assessment is most complete when it accounts not only for the object's actual or perceived ability to generate some output related to a function, but for the *way* the object works in a particular context, involving both situational and structural constraints, to produce that output. An artifact may be aesthetically meritorious by performing a function in a way that is clever or enjoyable, over and above the quality of its output. As I suggested in relation to the strip mall church, functional aesthetic appreciation is, at least in part, appreciation of how an entity capitalizes on opportunities, overcomes limitations, and offers clever and creative responses to the challenge jointly constituted by the target function and other elements of the situation.

Functional aesthetic assessment attentive to this full picture, especially where bodies are concerned, must start from deep curiosity. Rather than picking out unusual features and diagnosing them as imperfections on the grounds that they surely interfere with what we assume to be the body's functions, we must attend to the particulars of which functions the person has prioritized for their body, and how those functions are performed. To the extent that a body has features that strike us as unusual, we may find that some of the body's functions are being

performed in novel or adaptive ways that capitalize effectively on the juxtaposition of bodily structure, function, and context.

Does this account yield a positive aesthetics of the body, such that there are no bodily imperfections? No. People are free to value and use their body for functions that they have not yet mastered, that are difficult to pursue given the body's structural constraints, or that may require some bodily reshaping or retraining. A person may experience a feature of their body as an imperfection given some function they value: a performing artist may have reason to regard a feature that prevents them from achieving a desired effect as an aesthetic imperfection, as may a transgender person regard a feature that interferes with their gender expression.¹ Importantly, though, recognition of such bodily imperfections is responsive to the agent's own plans, priorities, and bodily self-conception, rather than to functions and associated aesthetic standards imposed from without.

Some reservations about functional aesthetic assessment of the body may persist. First, individuals' choices about which functions to embrace may reflect oppressive social contexts: as, arguably, is the case when someone chooses to prioritize the function of fashion modelling in an industry that prizes extreme thinness. This is a problem that all forms of bodily aesthetic assessment, functional or otherwise, must contend with: we have been taught to discipline ourselves and others to pursue standards of bodily beauty that contribute to social hierarchy and dehumanization. (Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*) Functional aesthetic assessment offers some prospect of improving on this situation if we are steadfast in prioritizing and valuing functions embraced by the individual rather than those assigned by society and in encouraging people to attend more to their body's functional powers than to its surface appearance. But I do not pretend that functional aesthetic assessment offers an easy solution to this problem.

A second reservation relates to the exclusive focus on functions embraced by the agent. Though I dismissed a focus on evolutionarily selected proper functions of the body as dehumanizing, performance of some of these functions is necessary for the person to live and be able to do anything at all. Should we not acknowledge as aesthetic imperfections those bodily features that perceptibly interfere with critical life functions? In response, I will note that even if something about the body's structure prevents it from functioning the way many other bodies function, whether through uncommon morphology or disease, it *is* continuing to function, perhaps in a way that is novel and adaptive. We can choose to apply interest and curiosity to how the system is functioning, just as we would do with inorganic nature, rather than concluding that disease or unusual configurations that alter functioning must be sources of aesthetic displeasure. Indeed, applying this sort of interest and curiosity to other organisms, as well as to human bodies, might both enhance our experience and improve our ethical propensity to value individual organisms in their unique functionality when they are configured unusually relative to other members of their species.

This leads to a third reservation, which is that my account, while purporting to advocate functional aesthetic assessment, abandons Parsons and Carlson's central project of using function to provide a consistent and non-arbitrary basis for aesthetically assessing objects of a given functional kind. Identifying the proper function of a group of artifacts by appeal to historical facts about the community's choices helps us know which of the artifact's features to focus on, namely, those that bear on the artifact's ability to perform that function. My account, on the other hand, presents us with a kaleidoscopic picture. Each body has an array of functions that shift over time, and it is unlikely that they will coincide with functions recognized by a given community. Identifying this shifting array requires attention to the specifics of an individual's

choices and signals. Aesthetic assessment, then, becomes a labour-intensive process of attending to each body on its own terms, with no clear comparison class or set of valued attributes we can appeal to in justifying a verdict.

In response to this reservation, I can only assent. Functional aesthetic assessment of human bodies, to pass ethical muster, must offer fine-grained attention to each body and the person whose body it is. When we attend closely and carefully to the specifics of a person's self-conception, how they understand their own body and its workings, and what they are trying to achieve through its use, the body's functional achievements and affordances become available to us. This might be better termed aesthetic *appreciation* than aesthetic assessment; and it is appreciation in the sense of seeking out positive, enjoyable affordances, not in the sense of evaluating something relative to standards geared to the identification of defects.

My account, then, may not yield what Parsons and Carlson were after. But this change in focus is necessary if we are to take seriously the ethical implications of aesthetic encounters with each other's embodiment. There is no aesthetic assessment of the body as a type of object, independent of the embodied person's choices and values, that does not dehumanize. Fortunately, functional aesthetic assessment that emphasizes the particularity of each body and each person offers aesthetic as well as ethical rewards. It allows us to see all forms of embodiment, including those with unusual morphology, as a rich wellspring of creative possibility, rather than as manifesting defect or imperfection. Will some bodily features still count as aesthetic imperfections? Yes, but not for reasons imposed on us independent of our own priorities and values; and the prospect remains for us to incorporate these features within a novel way of approaching our body's function, at which point they may become sources of positive aesthetic value.

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