

## ELEPHANTS, MICROSCOPES, AND FREE BEAUTY : COMMENTS FOR STEPHEN DAVIES

Is there such a thing as free beauty, if free beauty is defined as ‘a kind of beauty that attaches to the object of perception viewed not as of a kind but solely as an individual in its own right’ (229)?<sup>1</sup> Stephen Davies answers this question in the negative in his paper ‘Aesthetic Judgements, Artworks, and Functional Beauty’ (*The Philosophical Quarterly* 56). No judgment of beauty is indifferent to the conceptual classifications under which its subject falls. Our aesthetic evaluations of objects inevitably pay heed to the kinds to which they belong or in which we judge them to belong. Thus, in Davies’ view, saying ‘I don’t know what kind of thing this, but I know it is beautiful’ must be a little disingenuous. One always has some idea of the kind of thing one is looking at and that does matter in judging the object of perception to be beautiful.<sup>2</sup> It matters, more specifically, because ‘judgments of beauty make implicit appeal to statistical norms that implicate (natural or human) schemata for kinds and the natural laws and processes to which they are subject’ (230). So, according to Davies, X is never ‘just’ beautiful; X is always beautiful as an instance of kind y or z.

Davies mainly argues for his position by appealing to actual and imaginary examples. There is a general problem with this strategy, however. Those who appeal to examples often convince themselves more easily than their opponents. This, I want to argue, also holds for Davies. The examples he brings forward to support his view are not as compelling as he thinks. Furthermore, there is a class of counterexamples that he does not deal with and that puts considerable pressure on his account. I will present these counterexamples at the end of this paper, but first I will discuss and criticize three cases that Davies brings forward in defence of his position.

(1) One way to lend plausibility to the idea that our aesthetic reactions to objects inevitably pay heed to the kinds to which they belong, is to point out, as Davies repeatedly does, that ‘excessive or inexplicable departures from the usual

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<sup>1</sup> All page references are from Stephen Davies, ‘Aesthetic Judgements, Artworks, and Functional Beauty,’ *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (2006), pp. 224-241.

<sup>2</sup> ‘An example might be that of ancient cave paintings, the intended functions of which are little understood. (...) such cases are not best considered as instances of free beauty. Though we must be blind to whatever complex context-relative symbolic and other meanings such pieces possessed for their makers, we acknowledge them as humanly made and as expressing art-like sensibilities and interests.’ (232)

limits of its kind count against our judging a thing to be beautiful.’ (229) Davies illustrates this with daffodils, dawn skies, and waterfalls. These are cliché instances of beauty, *free beauty*, one might think, but, Davies argues, a daffodil, dawn sky or waterfall that departs too far from what is normal for its kind will not be judged beautiful, which shows that our aesthetic judgement is not free at all. He formulates this poignantly: ‘A daffodil that shape-shifted as the waterfall does and shared the dawn sky’s blue-blackness would be unlikely to strike us as beautiful.’ (228)

This argument is less than convincing. It is undoubtedly true that *sometimes* excessive or inexplicable departures from kind-relative norms will count against our judging a thing to be beautiful. But this is not always the case. In fact, one may wonder whether it is even true for Davies’s own example of a blue-blackish daffodil. Just like a blue tulip or a black rose were once highly desired objects, one can perfectly imagine that people would desire and admire a blue-blackish daffodil. (One can actually find some digitally altered images of blue daffodils on the internet and they are quite beautiful.) Moreover, it is easy to imagine other examples of excessive or inexplicable aberrations that are not necessarily ugly: miniature daffodils, red daffodils, red polar bears or panthers, etc. Or think of animals that are ‘cosmetically challenged’.<sup>3</sup> The aye-aye is a good example. Imagine a particular aye-aye being born with cute small ears, soft blue eyes, and a nice fur coat instead of the usual unappealing black skin. In this particular case the inexplicable departures from kind-relative norms will not *detract* from the creature’s beauty, but rather *enhance* its beauty. Examples of this sort clearly undermine the claim that each time we judge something to be beautiful, we judge it to be a beautiful specimen of a kind, a specimen that fits neatly within structural norms and scope of that kind.

Besides, if, when we judge something to be beautiful, we really judge it to be a beautiful specimen of a certain sort, why is it then that we can make aesthetic judgements of kinds themselves? We do sometimes say that daffodils are beautiful or lilies-in-the-valley are beautiful and not just that *this* daffodil or *that* lily-in-the-valley is beautiful. Conversely, people often find spiders or certain insects *as a species* ugly.

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<sup>3</sup> In January 2008 ‘the Zoological Society of London, prompted by news that 85 per cent of amphibians threatened with extinction were receiving almost no conservation, released a top 10 of cosmetically challenged salamanders and frogs. The list aimed to raise awareness of strange but unique creatures often overlooked in favour of the cute and the cuddly.’ (The Independent, 31 January 2008)

To be sure, I do not wish to deny that, generally speaking, what makes something a beautiful specimen of *y* is different from what makes something a beautiful specimen of *z*. What I find hard to accept is that every time we judge something to be beautiful, we judge it to be a beautiful specimen of a certain kind.

(2) As Davies points out, ‘the long spindly legs of a newborn fawn have a fragile beauty, but an elephant baby born with limbs like that would be a mutant, beautiful only in its mother’s eyes.’ (229) Thus, what might seem to be an instance of free beauty, the fawn’s legs, is really not so because those same legs, seen as belonging to an elephant, would signal maladaptiveness and be considered freakish rather than beautiful. With this example Davies means to illustrate how our aesthetic reactions to an object depend on the kind to which we judge that object to belong.

But, again, I am not fully convinced. The first thing to note is that the set-up of this example is somewhat misleading. Everyone will probably agree that a young fawn has a kind of fragile beauty, especially when it moves around in its own elegantly clumsy way. However, although a fawn uses its legs to move around, it is usually not the legs considered in themselves that we judge to be beautiful. When we see a bird with striking plumage we do say things like ‘Look at the beautiful feathers of that bird’, but people will rarely, if ever, focus exclusively on the legs of a fawn and say: ‘Look at those legs. How beautiful!’ (People decorate their houses with bird feathers but not with the legs of a fawn.) What we judge to be beautiful is the fawn in its entirety, including its appearance and movements. Thus, Davies’s thought experiment is set up in a misleading way. The fact that we judge the combination of a fawn’s legs and an elephant’s body to be freakish rather than beautiful, is meant to show that our original judgement of the beauty of the fawn’s legs is a judgment of dependent beauty, the beauty of the legs being dependent on the fact that they belong to a fawn and not an elephant. But, as I have indicated, it is not the legs as such, but the fawn considered in its entirety that we normally judge to be beautiful. The imaginary case of the freakish elephant does not prove that *this* is a judgment of dependent beauty.

Suppose, however, that we put this objection aside and assume for argument’s sake that the legs of a newborn fawn, considered in themselves, strike us as beautiful. Even on this assumption, the thought experiment as formulated by Davies is ineffective in showing that this must be an instance of dependent beauty. For in order to show that the beauty of the legs depends specifically on the fact that they belong to

a fawn, one has to argue that we would not judge them beautiful if, for instance, we knew they were elephant legs.

But this is not Davies's argument. He does not claim that the *legs* of the freakish baby elephant are ugly, but rather that the mutant elephant baby itself is ugly. Even if this is true, even if no one would judge the mutant elephant baby with its strange combination of spindly legs and heavy body to be beautiful, that does not imply that no one would judge the creature's legs to be beautiful. To draw a comparison: people may agree that a certain combination of shoes and trousers is absurd while at the same time agreeing that the shoes themselves are beautiful. Remember that we assumed for argument's sake that the fawn's legs are beautiful considered in themselves. If we accept this, then why shouldn't we also accept that the legs of the mutant elephant are beautiful considered in themselves? And if there is no reason to assume that the legs of the mutant elephant are not beautiful, considered in themselves, then there is no reason to assume that our original judgment of beauty (a fawn's legs considered in themselves) is a judgment of dependent beauty.

(3) In order to show that the beauty of a perceptual object X depends on its being classified as an instance of y rather than z, one needs to demonstrate that X, classified as a y is beautiful, while the same X, classified as z, is not beautiful. The previous example did not fit this structure. There are really only two examples in Davies's paper that do. The first one is this: 'if a person discovered that he was observing not a polar bear but a machine disguised as a bear, or a zookeeper in a bear suit, I doubt that the movements would appear to him to be elegant' (230). The second example is this: 'What will strike him as apt for beauty in a sea cucumber depends on its being a sea-cucumber and not, say, a salad cucumber.' (230) I will concentrate on this latter example.

Suppose you see what you think is a spectacularly coloured and exotically shaped sea-cucumber. Davies's idea is that you would not consider this object beautiful if you learn that that it is in fact a (mutated) *salad* cucumber rather than a sea-cucumber. But is this correct? I have done a quick, informal survey. I showed people a picture of a beautifully coloured sea-cucumber, told them what it was and asked them for their aesthetic opinion. Everyone thought the cucumber was beautiful. Then I told them that I had not been completely honest and that the picture actually shows a salad cucumber instead of a sea-cucumber. I asked them whether they were inclined to revise their aesthetic judgement now. No one was. The general response

was something along the lines of ‘I would not want to eat it, but I still consider it beautiful.’

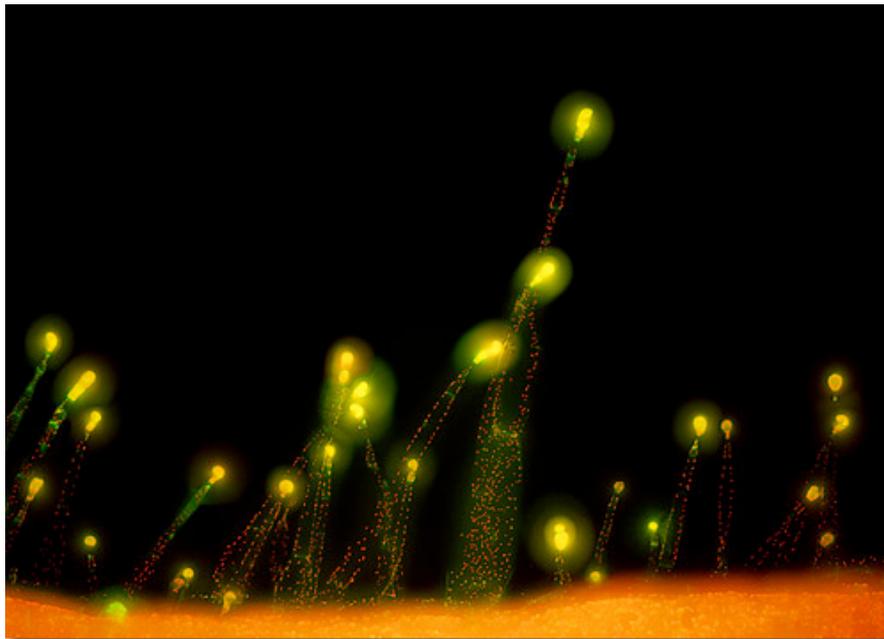
Again, Davies’s own example turns out to be less compelling than he thinks. The fact that the perceptual object shown in the picture strikes us as beautiful does not depend on its being a sea-cucumber rather than a salad-cucumber. In fact, this particular judgment of beauty seems quite independent of the kinds and conceptual classifications under which its subject falls. Suppose I had said that the depicted object is not a sea-cucumber or a salad cucumber, but rather something man-made, a colourful sea-cucumber-like machine. Probably people would still have considered it beautiful. (Just as, I suspect, most people would consider a machine to be beautiful and elegant if it was truly visually indistinguishable from a swimming polar bear.) There is something about its spectacular arrangement of colours and shapes that makes it ‘just’ beautiful, period.

When I say that the colours and shapes of a sea-cucumber strike us as ‘just’ beautiful, does this imply that the subject of our judgment of free beauty is really a ‘perceptual manifold’, i.e. a coloured and spatially organized manifold of sense-data that may be brought under certain concepts (colour, shape, ...) but that is not united in the concept of an object? If this is my claim, Davies has a ready response, namely: ‘to deny that we encounter such perceptual manifolds in nature. We do not usually meet with coloured and spatially organized arrays of sense-data, but objects, processes or events that may, individually or collectively, strike us as beautiful.’ (230) So, though I may *think* that my judgement of beauty is directed at a perceptual manifold that is not united in the concept of an object, this is not what actually goes on. According to Davies, every time we judge something to be beautiful – and the sea-cucumber case is no exception – (i) we recognize that something is a particular object (or process or event); (ii) we judge that object to belong to a certain kind, or rather, to a number of different kinds; and (iii) our judgement of beauty depends on that classification. That is why, according to Davies, there is no such thing as free beauty.

My response to this objection is twofold. First, when I defend the idea that the beauty of the sea-cucumber may be an instance of free beauty, I do not claim that the subject of our judgement is a perceptual manifold. I do not have to make a claim like this because, according to Davies’s own definition, free beauty is ‘a kind of beauty that attaches to the object of perception viewed not as of a kind but solely as an individual in its own right’ (229). In other words, a judgment of free beauty is

perfectly compatible with its subject being classified as an individual or object. It is reasonable to suppose that when we judge the sea-cucumber to be beautiful, the subject of our judgment is an object, probably even an object that we categorize (correctly or incorrectly) as this or that kind of object. So I have no problem accepting (i) or even (ii) in this particular case. What I object to is (iii). Davies has not given any evidence to support the claim that our judgement of beauty inevitably pays heed to the kind to we judge the object to belong. The fact that people are not tempted to change their aesthetic evaluation when the classification changes from ‘sea-cucumber’ to ‘salad cucumber’ to ‘artificially created decorative element’, rather points in the opposite direction.

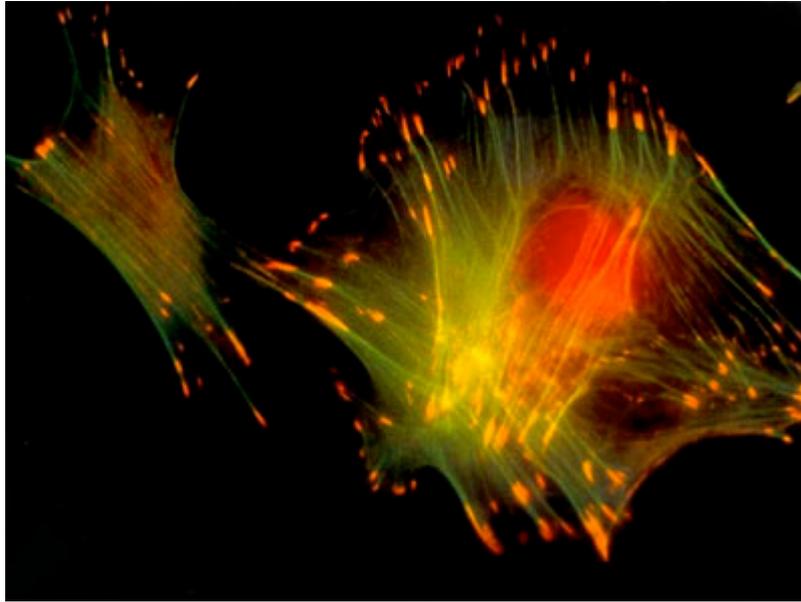
Second, is it true that we never encounter perceptual manifolds? Davies states this matter-of-factly, but aren’t there situations in which what we see is best described in terms of ‘coloured and spatially organized arrays of sense-data’? Imagine peering through a microscope and seeing the following spectacle:



*Figure 1*

Without detailed background information, we have no idea what we are looking at. We don’t know whether these are objects, events or processes, let alone that we could

be more specific. Nevertheless, what we see strikes us as beautiful. Here is another example:



*Figure 2*

It seems that in these cases we can say, honestly and truthfully, and *pace* Davies: ‘I don’t know what this is and it does not matter, it is just beautiful.’<sup>4</sup> Nature looked at through a microscope (or a telescope), provides us with a particular class of counterexamples that have not been dealt with by Davies and that put considerable pressure on his account. For here it seems we have judgements of beauty that are supremely indifferent to the conceptual classifications under which their subjects fall.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Both images are micrographs.

Figure 1: Transgenic *Nicotiana benthamiana* plant © Heiti Paves, Tallin University of Technology

Figure 2: Mouse fibroblasts © Barbara A. Danowski, Union College

<sup>5</sup> I am very grateful to Jonathan Friday, Michael Newall and Rafael De Clercq for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.