**Good Looking**

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**1. Introduction**

According to common wisdom, we are attracted to what we find beautiful. But the opposite is often true as well; as we come to like something we may also come to find it to have greater aesthetic appeal. A striking example of this appears in a recent set of studies in which insight into a person’s moral qualities is shown to influence perception of their physical attractiveness. People evaluate those with positive moral character to be prettier. Kind people seem more handsome. Generous people are easier on the eyes. Likewise, when a person demonstrates bad character, assessments of their physical attractiveness tend to become correspondingly less favorable. What is going on in these cases?

One way to explain this phenomenon is to appeal to the halo-effect.[[1]](#footnote-1) The halo-effect is where positive evaluations of a person in one domain have global effects that lead to positive evaluations in other domains. For example, a person who is good at sports may be perceived as being more talented across a number of other measures. But this one-size-fits-all explanation skips over interesting relationships between specific perceived attributes as well as the psychological mechanisms involved. These relationships and mechanisms are both interesting and philosophically relevant.

This paper offers the following explanation: some perceptual experiences are evaluative, they both represent the object in terms of its more or less directly perceptible features, and they also include an evaluative component that contributes to their overall phenomenology. In the cases that I discuss, this evaluative component involves aesthetic assessments of physical attractiveness. I propose that we respond to people based on their moral character with sentiments of positive or negative esteem and these feelings also influence the evaluative phenomenology and content of our perceptual experiences of them. Moreover, although the evaluative experiences seem to have to do with outwardly manifest sensible properties of the perceived object, I suspect that these evaluative experiences are actually tracking something else. When influenced by knowledge of moral character, the perceptual experiences gain aesthetic phenomenology whereby they represent objects as having positive or negative value. I am not saying that physical attractiveness is itself valuable, or that to be evaluated as valuable one must be experienced as attractive. In fact, I want to move away from the idea that experiences like that of experiencing someone as beautiful, need track the outwardly manifest qualities of an object. But experiencing an object, landscape, situation, or creature as aesthetically appealing is one mode seeing it to have value.

This relationship between moral character and our perception of physical attractiveness is interesting in its own right but these insights have broader philosophical implications as well. There is already a good amount of evidence in favor of so-called ‘high-level’ perceptual contents, information about perceptual objects represented in perceptual experience that is not reducible to the sensory information that the experiences carry.[[2]](#footnote-2) Evaluative content is a special species of high-level content and is somewhat more controversial, but has a place in aesthetics, epistemology and moral philosophy. We make aesthetic (beautiful, ugly)[[3]](#footnote-3), normative (right/wrong, good/bad)[[4]](#footnote-4) and prudential (dangerous, beneficial) evaluations all of the time. Can these evaluations be a part of the way we perceive things?

One reason that evaluative perception has been so controversial is that it isn’t clear how perceptual experiences would come to have evaluative contents. In the case of other kinds of high-level perceptions as when we experience objects to be particular kinds of objects (a pine tree for example), it seems likely that some pre-existing concept or higher-order cognition penetrates perceptual experience. But in the case of evaluative perceptions, an evaluative experience can serve as the basis for evaluative beliefs that someone didn’t previously have like when moral perception leads to moral knowledge (a person sees something as wrong and so comes to form the belief that it is), or when it leads someone to reform moral beliefs that they already had (as when someone changes his mind about gay marriage after seeing the gay neighbors and experiencing it to be okay). If cognitive penetration doesn’t seem to be capable of doing all of the necessary explanatory work in the case of evaluative perception, how else might experiences come to include an evaluative component?

**2. The Empirical Cases**

A recent set of studies demonstrates that when someone is given information pertaining to a person’s moral character it influences the way that they go on to evaluate the person’s physical attractiveness. In one set of studies, participants were presented with written or verbal cues expressive of character traits (honest, kind, callous) concurrently alongside a photograph of an individual. A control group was shown only the photographs. Subjects were asked to evaluate the physical attractiveness of those depicted. Evaluations made by people who were exposed to information about character differed systematically from the evaluations made by controls and they correlated with the character trait valences: photographs presented alongside cues for positive character traits correlated with higher ratings of physical attractiveness and morally undesirable character traits correlated with lower assessments of physical attractiveness.[[5]](#footnote-5) Subsequent studies eliminated the control group to ensure that the effect wasn’t due to individual differences. Subjects were asked to evaluate the same individual before and after being given information about his or her character. Here, the evaluations of physical attractiveness changed to correspond with the subject’s perceived character.

Other studies were designed so that information about a person’s moral qualities would be gathered by subjects in the process of interacting directly with individuals in various ways, such as on the completion of a task. In one study, members of a rowing team were asked to rate one another on a variety of measures including attractiveness, talent, effort, liking and respect.[[6]](#footnote-6) Controls who did not engage with team members also rated the physical attractiveness of the rowers. Teammates negatively rated the attractiveness of a person who they described as a ‘slacker’ whereas the most helpful accomplished and liked was rated uniformly as very attractive. These differences did not show up in the controls’ ratings. In another study, subjects rated the physical attractiveness of one another before engaging together on an archeological dig.[[7]](#footnote-7) Here, a subject who was experienced to be uncooperative and lazy was rated as less attractive after the dig than before and a woman who had been perceived to be less attractive before the dig but who proved to be popular and hardworking came to be evaluated as significantly more physically attractive.[[8]](#footnote-8) These studies seem to show that our sense of a person’s character can be quite influential in changing our judgments about their physical attractiveness from negative to positive as well as in the opposite direction.

So then, how do these evaluative judgments arise? One possibility is that they are all inferred. Based on a concoction of experience, perceived character attributes, linking background beliefs, not to mention our own observed behavioral dispositions toward the person, we make inferences about character. An alternative view is that at least some evaluative judgments reflect pre-judgmental evaluative experiences that have matching evaluative content. By ‘evaluative experience’ I mean a non-judgmental experience at least part of whose phenomenology seems evaluative and which assesses the target in an aesthetic, normative or prudential way. On this latter view, it wouldn’t just be that our judgments about a person’s appearance that are influenced by our sense of their character, but the way we experience a person’s character can also influence the quality of our pre-judgmental experiences of how they look. In the case here, evaluative experiences would be experiences that seem to present the target as having some apparent aesthetic quality that is evaluative such as ‘beauty’. I think that the presence of non-judgmental evaluative experiences makes the best sense of what occurs in the empirical cases reviewed. The rest of this section motivates the fairly intuitive view that there are non-judgmental evaluative experiences with apparently aesthetic phenomenology.

The view that beauty is something that can be observed in perceptual experience is reflected in cultural products and public discourse. For instance, the assumption that there are evaluative experiences is familiar in environmental writing and ecology. There is a tradition in ecological conservation that has used the aesthetic value of the environment as at least partial motivation for its conservation. It is easy to feel the pull for conservation in cases where aesthetic properties are highly salient, for instance the grandeur of the Grand Canyon, or the majesty of the high sierra. But the argument for conservation from aesthetic appeal has also been extended to less obviously beautiful mosquito infested swamps and empty prairies. To take a well known example, Aldo Leopold thought that the land’s value was a function of both the collective harmony of its components and its historical importance.[[9]](#footnote-9) He also believed that aesthetic experiences can reflect this value provided that one adopt the correct perspective. Although the land’s beauty may not be immediately or consistently apparent, we can come to see there to be beauty in a landscape or feature that seems aesthetically uninteresting as we learn about key aspects of its value such as the possible presence of relevant wildlife. This idea about the evaluative nature of perceptual experience of the environment that is sometimes referred to in environmentalism reflects an experience that seems to be common in other aspects of life.

In the realm of art appreciation, evaluative experiences are fairly commonplace. To highlight this consider what it might be like to encounter an example of abstract expressionism in painting for the first time such as a piece by Jackson Pollock. Initially a Pollock painting may seem to have no more aesthetic value than a random accidental paint splatter. But in coming to know more about genre, style, aesthetic history and culture, one’s aesthetic experience of it may change.[[10]](#footnote-10) The painting may come to be noticed to be more visually compelling. But it isn’t just knowledge that seems to precipitate changes in evaluative experience, even mere exposure will do the trick.[[11]](#footnote-11) If you had only ever been exposed to musical forms with consistent regular rhythms such as minuets, waltzes or traditional marches you could imagine that at first a form that relies heavily on syncopation like jazz would feel jarring. But over time you might discover in it some aesthetic value that your initial experience had failed to pick up.

Moreover, these evaluative aesthetic experiences need not arise in the context of evaluative judgments.[[12]](#footnote-12) Evaluative experiences and evaluative judgments are separable. For instance, most people have a considered evaluative idea concerning their own physical attractiveness.[[13]](#footnote-13) Studies show that the average person considers him or herself to be slightly better looking than average, a 6 or 7 on a 10 point scale with 5 being average. But there are conditions under which our experience of ourselves does not match with our considered ideas about how attractive we are. Reflected in the mirror in the airport bathroom, for instance, we may experience ourselves as considerably less attractive than we actually believe ourselves to be. The harsh fluorescent lighting accentuates lines, dimples, sagging skin, a ruddy complexion. Our considered view about our self, which may or may not be held in the forefront of the mind, conflicts with the way we experience ourselves to be. We may experience our self to be less attractive. And on the other hand, certain conditions can enhance how physically attractive we appear to be. If a person is unhappy with some aspect of how they appear, they can adjust the lighting to a soft front light, or something more subdued as if inside a dimly lit bar. These changes in lighting don’t necessarily change our considered judgments about our appearance. But they can have an impact on how attractive we experience our self to be in the moment. It isn’t just that we experience our self without perceived flaws. We experience ourselves as better looking in that moment than we know ourselves to be. This discrepancy between what we believe and what we experience in a given moment shows that evaluative judgments and evaluative experiences can come apart.

A possible objection to this example is that these mirror cases do not involve discrepancies between beliefs about our relative attractiveness and non-judgmental experiences about our attractiveness, but rather differences between our considered beliefs about how attractive we are and judgments that we make in the moment about how we ‘appear’ based on our reflections. In that case, the example wouldn’t show that we can have evaluative experiences without evaluative judgments. I think that this can happen. But I don’t think that this account covers all of these cases; it does not seem that the natural reaction to seeing an image of oneself is always to form a judgment about how one looks. The most immediate response to seeing one’s reflection seems more likely to concern the way we take ourselves to be, rather than the way we merely appear to be. An experience of how one takes oneself to be would be more likely to be accompanied by an emotional reaction, and I suspect that such emotional reactions are common when we come face to face with our reflections in less ideal lighting situations.

In summary, our experience of someone’s character can influence our judgment about how physically attractive they are. I mentioned two mechanisms by which this could occur, by inference or because evaluations reflect non-judgmental evaluative experiences.[[14]](#footnote-14) My proposal is that exposure to moral character at least sometimes leads to changes in our pre-judgmental experiences where they take on an evaluative character. The next thing that I want to consider is how aesthetically evaluative experiences come to be in the contexts where knowledge of moral character leads to experiences of greater or lesser physical attractiveness.

**3. Affective States**

It would be natural to look to affective states to explain how knowledge of moral character leads to changes in our experience of a person’s physical attractiveness. By affective states I mean the category that includes moods (depression), emotions (anger), and feelings (love); for our purposes it will suffice to treat many of these experiences in the same way. The proposal that affective states play a role here seems natural because: it fits naturally with the popular view that some affective states are evaluative, it helps to explain a perplexing aspect of some of the empirical cases, and it fits nicely with the empirical data. Let’s look more closely at this.

One reason that it seems natural that affective states would play a role in the generation of evaluative experience is that it fits with the view that at least some affective states are evaluative states. For example, some view emotions as evaluative responses involving a target toward which they refer (what is evaluated) and a way in which the target is evaluated to be, called a ‘formal object’.[[15]](#footnote-15) If I am afraid of a spider, the spider is the target of my fear and my fear evaluates the spider to be dangerous. This evaluation is expressed phenomenologically in the feeling of being afraid, and also in various behavioral dispositions I may have such as avoidance. Moreover, even affective states that do not appear to be responses to particular objects, such as moods, often seem to represent in an evaluative way. Being in a state of anxiety coincides with prudential evaluations of one’s life-world and specific things in it as being threatening or uncertain.

The involvement of affective states would also help to explain how, in some of the empirical cases noted, character traits were picked up directly in the context of interacting with participants before there was a chance to consider the cases explicitly. Whether we think of ethics in terms of right action or in terms of virtuous character, determining the right and the good depends on the consideration of the specific circumstances. Details of situations differ greatly from one another making it impossible to come up with a series of rules or a complex rubric to resolve what should be done in each case. What is the generous or courageous thing to do in one case may be a foolish thing to do in another. So it is difficult to see how someone could make ethical appraisals in those cases by appeal to reason alone. Affective states, on the other hand, are often sensitive to un-enumerable holistic patterns of information, as for instance when you get an uneasy feeling on a date but you just aren’t able to pinpoint what exactly about the individual or situation is making you uncomfortable.

A third consideration implicating the involvement of affective states is that the empirical studies confirm that esteem for a person plays a role in mediating between perception of a person’s character and the evaluative aesthetic judgments that are made. For example, one study had subjects rate photographs of classmates from high school on the measures of familiarity, attractiveness, liking and respect. Positive evaluations on the measures of liking and respect went along with higher evaluations of physical attractiveness.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Another study had heterosexual subjects rate opposite sex participants. A pre-test to determine base-line evaluations was given followed by a distraction task. Subjects were then presented evidence of positive or negative character traits and were asked to evaluate participants a second time, but this time they were also asked, “how much would you like to be friends with this person?” and “how much would you like to date this person?”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Desire for friendship and romantic connection went up or down correlative with character trait valence. One interpretation is that we are more likely to want to be friends with individuals when we are exposed to evidence of their good character because we develop positive esteem for them and this is then reflected in how desirable we see them to be. The key idea here is that witnessing good character leads us to like and respect people, and this results in greater perceived attractiveness and desirability.[[18]](#footnote-18)

A third study presented subjects with a description of a target’s personality, which highlighted the target’s level of honesty, intelligence and independence. Subjects then made inferences about the target’s personality after which they rated the attractiveness of a set of photographs depicting average looking members of the same sex. The trait of honesty correlated with assessments of greater attractiveness and researchers determined that liking seemed to mediate these effects.[[19]](#footnote-19)

It seems to follow from these considerations that when our evaluative experiences are influenced by our assessments of a person’s good character, it is due in part to the fact that we like people with good character. We can assume the inverse as well, that bad character leads to negative evaluations of physical attractiveness because we tend to not like people who display bad character. But we have yet to determine what role liking plays in the change in evaluative experience. One possibility is that the experiences are identical. This means that the evaluative aesthetic experiences involved in the empirical cases are just states of positively or negatively esteeming the target; to experience someone as physically attractive just is to like them. The problem with this view is that it doesn’t obviously explain the evaluative phenomenology of aesthetic evaluations in particular. The evaluative phenomenology of ‘liking’ doesn’t seem adequate to account for experiences in which we see someone as physically attractive or unattractive. This point deserves some elaboration.

In the philosophical literature on affective states and emotion, states of positively esteeming are generally taken to represent their targets as being valuable. For instance, desire, it has been argued, is a state of valuing possible or actual ‘states of affairs’ or situations such as winning the lottery or getting a divorce.[[20]](#footnote-20) Velleman and others develop the view that the emotion of ‘love’ is the ultimate response to the dignity of persons, dignity being a unique irreplaceable type of intrinsic value that makes individuals non-fungible. Liking is similar to both desire and love, but seems to differ from desire in respect of the type of thing that it takes as its target. Liking can be aimed at objects, people, ideas, etc. and not just states of affairs. Liking also differs from love but in respect of the degree or quality with which it evaluates the target’s value. It seems that I can like something like candy because candy is good for me, irrespective of any intrinsic value that it may or may not have.

But experiencing a person as attractive seems to go beyond just recognizing their value. Consider something or someone that you experience to be beautiful. The phenomenology of such experiences is perceptual and it seems to represent the target to have the aesthetic property of beauty. When we experience a beautiful scene, the aesthetic property of ‘beauty’ is presented to us as though it is an objective property of the object. Moreover, the property has perceptual phenomenology, it appears to us as a perceptible feature of the scene. Although it does not have the same sort of directly perceptible phenomenology that colors or sounds have, it is experienced as a property of the object that we perceive indirectly in virtue of perceiving the object’s more directly apprehended qualities. This is reflected in our language. We talk about the landscape as beautiful or the man as handsome, attributing the aesthetic quality to the object. To say that these aesthetic experiences have perceptual phenomenology, and that we seem to perceive them in virtue of more directly sensible properties, is to imply that some perceptual experiences have a partially evaluative component in addition to sensory character that contributes to their overall phenomenology. ‘Liking’ on its own does not have perceptual phenomenology. And attributing value to an object is not one in the same thing as seeing it to be beautiful.[[21]](#footnote-21) So liking is not identical to the evaluative aesthetic experiences that are responsive to information about moral character.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**4. Causation and Constitution**

I have argued that affective states of positive and negative esteeming play a mediating role between assessments of a person’s moral character and evaluative judgments that are made about their attractiveness. If evaluative aesthetic judgments reflect evaluative aesthetic experiences, then it seems likely that these esteeming states play a role in the evaluative component of such experiences as well. Since those experiences have perceptual phenomenology, evaluative experiences cannot be identical to affective states. This leaves two possibilities: affective states can be causally related to the evaluative perceptual experiences, or they can be constitutively related. I think that the latter is more likely. I’ll elaborate.

The relationship between an affective state and a perceptual experience is merely causal if the experience’s phenomenology and content is counterfactually dependent on the affective state, but the state’s contents are separate insofar as the content of the affective state is not contributed to the content of the perceptual experience. There is research on the emotion of disgust that provides an example in which emotion merely causally impacts perceptual experience. It is thought that disgust evaluates its target as a contaminant. Feeling disgust for something has been shown to influence the way that the target is spatially represented.[[23]](#footnote-23) For instance, disgusted subjects are more likely to perceive slimy or dirty tools as in closer proximity than clean tools. This is thought to motivate the person to keep a greater distance between themselves and potential contaminants. But what seems particularly relevant for us is that in some studies, subjects who were shown disgusting and neutral images to elicit disgust subsequently experienced even clean tools as being closer. I don’t think that we want to say here that the participant is temporarily representing all tools as contaminants, despite the fact that the emotion of disgust has had an influence on the spatial phenomenology and content of their representation of tools. Rather, after the person feels disgust, the person just temporarily experiences tools as closer than they typically would experience them to be.

By contrast, we might say that if the affective state and the perceptual experience, are coincident temporally and perhaps spatially, the perceptual experience’s character and content is counterfactually dependent on the affective state, AND it takes on some of the affective state’s content, then the relationship is one of at least partial constitution of the perceptual experience by the affective state.

Depression is an example of an affective state whose content potentially infects the content of perceptual experience. To use somewhat non-technical terminology, one of the core features of depression is a diminishment in one’s own sense of presence, a felt loss of vitality and of inhabiting one’s life and world. Depressed people report not only a lack of energy, but a loss of significance and meaning in things that ordinarily bring meaning to their lives and an absence of motivation to engage in even basic daily tasks. Moreover, there is reason to think that this diminished sense of presence and vitality makes its way into the phenomenology and content of their perceptions. One place that researchers believe this occurs is in color experience. Colors are experiential qualities that usually appear in experience as though they were properties of object surfaces. They have representational character. We might say that the equivalence of ‘vitality’ in color experience is saturation or vibrancy as these are the properties most relevant to the manifestation of colors qua color. Depressed people often report that they experience colors of objects to be duller, less vibrant and report less contrast perception. Objective measures confirm these subjective reports by describing the unique biological correlates for these experiences in the retinas of depressed people[[24]](#footnote-24). Here the diminished sense of vitality that characterizes the content and experience of the mood seems to infect the visual experience, manifesting in the inhibition of color saturation. Another way to say this is that the visual experience is partly constituted by the depressed mood.

I think that the change in evaluation complicit in the empirical cases involving moral character and aesthetic evaluations is more like the depression case than like the disgust case. From the phenomenological standpoint, we experience a quality associated with attractiveness like beauty as if it were a quality of the object. When depressed people have color experiences that represent objects to be lacking in vibrancy relative to what is normal, this can be interpreted as a visual manifestation of a lack of vitality they experience generally. On my view, aesthetic qualities like beauty have a similar etiology. Affective states of esteeming lend their content to perceptual experiences, giving rise to represented aesthetic properties such as ‘beauty’ or ‘ugliness’ and these aesthetic qualities, with their apparently perceptual character, characterize the object as having positive or negative value. [[25]](#footnote-25) I’ve been speaking mostly about the aesthetic experience of beauty as a visual representation of value, but it could be auditory, or olfactory etc.

One of the virtues of this view that aesthetic evaluations are partly constituted by esteeming affective states, aside from the fact that it provides a good account for both the character and content of evaluative aesthetic experiences, is that it explains the motivational nature of aesthetic experiences. Many aesthetic experiences seem to be intrinsically motivating. This is particularly salient where they involve aesthetic evaluations of living things. For example, infants and baby animals are generally experienced as being cute. This is thought to serve as an evolutionary mechanism for arousing our protective feelings and nurturing behaviors toward them. Markers of cuteness include big eyes, large heads and small noses. Studies show that babies rated as cuter have parents who engage in more attentive parenting behaviors.[[26]](#footnote-26) The same explanation applies to our attraction to baby animals. This phenomenon is used to good effect in marketing. Charities aiming to engage people in conservation or preservation market using images of ‘cute’ animals (where cute means large eyes, small noses) such as seals rather than less cute animals such as fish. Similarly, when we perceive a conspecific of the gender that we are attracted to as attractive certain behaviors toward them may be activated, such as flirting. These aesthetic experiences seem intrinsically motivating, they act as direct motivation to engage in certain behaviors. Regular non-evaluative perceptual experiences do not themselves have motivational properties. Nor do most think that purely cognitive evaluative states like beliefs and other types of evaluative judgments are. It is generally only affective states that are thought to be intrinsically motivating in this way. The view that evaluative perceptual experiences are partially constituted by such states makes sense of or explains how those evaluative experiences can be intrinsically motivating.

In summary, I have sketched a view of evaluative aesthetic experiences that explains their character and content in a way that is consistent with the empirical cases discussed. In those cases, affective states of positive and negative esteem help to transform perceptual experiences of those with positive moral character by becoming constitutively related to those perceptual experiences. This view will seem more plausible to the extent that it has greater explanatory power and fits in a comprehensive explanation of other similar phenomena. The next section aims to situate this discussion in such a broader context.

**5. Liking and Loving**

There are differences in the degrees and types of positive or negative esteem we can feel toward a person, the way in which we experience them as attractive or unattractive, and the types of value that we can represent people to have. I think that there are systematic correlations among these differences and that this lends further support for the view that affective states of esteem toward an individual can lend their contents to visual experiences that they partly constitute, resulting in experiences with evaluative aesthetic phenomenology and the types of evaluative content that I have discussed.

Positive esteem seems to fall along a continuum with less ideal examples on one end and more ideal examples on the other end. Let’s start with an example of what may seem to be a less than ideal instance of liking another person- the kind experienced by people with specific personality disorders. Some personality disorders involve emotional deficits and related problems with the ability to bond with and care for others. One example where these deficits appear is Narcissistic Personality Disorder.[[27]](#footnote-27) Narcissism is marked by self-absorption and an inability to feel empathy and respect for others. People who have this personality style do not relate to others as independent individuals with their own feelings, thoughts, goals and rights. Instead, narcissists see others in terms of their relation to their own needs for esteem: they may idealize others who they can then identify with in some fashion, they may use others as sources of admiration, and they may project their perceived weaknesses and flaws onto others in order to dissociate from those qualities.

Undoubtedly, there is a sense in which, when both I and the person with Narcissistic Personality Disorder say that we ‘like’ our romantic partners or family members, we mean some of the same things. There are likely to be some shared phenomenological features as well as behavioral dispositions that are shared to a greater or lesser degree. But there are also notable differences in our esteeming feelings and behaviors.

Because the narcissist values others only in terms of their ability to satisfy his own needs, his attachments to them are generally shallow. The narcissist may experience fleeting infatuation and idealized feelings but he can easily detach from people if he feels that they cannot play a positive role in helping to regulate his self-esteem. His shallow feelings correlate with the shallow instrumental value that he seems to represent people close to him to have.

If narcissists have shallow feelings of esteem with which they represent people as having merely instrumental value, we might expect their capacity for experiencing people as physically attractive to reflect this. I don’t know of any empirical studies that would confirm this. Moreover, it is obvious that narcissists can at least recognize conventionally or objectively attractive people since they often seek out relationships with such people as a means to collect validation. But I don’t think this is incompatible with the idea that they have merely shallow affections. It is not necessary that all evaluative aesthetic experiences are constituted by affections; there is no reason to think that there is only one mechanism undergirding aesthetic evaluations. Moreover, the narcissist’s shallow emotions do bring along changes in aesthetic phenomenology. For those with narcissism, evaluations, including aesthetic evaluations, of partners change over the course of the pathological relationship cycle. They are generally highly flattering at the beginning ‘idealizing’ stages of their relationships, but turn unrealistically unflattering when it is determined that the person cannot serve as a source of validation.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In healthier cases, when we recognize people as possessing value, that value is recognized as inhering in them despite their usefulness to us. In many cases we come to like a person because they exhibit virtuous traits such as honesty, generosity, compassion, and moral courage. And when we experience these traits as properties of a person, our experience represents that person as valuable in virtue of those traits. I think it is likely that this happens in at least some of the empirical cases involving assessments of character bringing in tow changes in perceived attractiveness. Seeing certain character traits as good and liking a person in virtue of the goodness of their character depends to some degree on the perceiver’s own moral knowledge, and character, since taking virtues as good in themselves requires the ability to see things as more than a means to one’s own happiness. Of course, many positive character traits are also ‘pro-social’ or conducive to the well-being of others and flourishing of the community. So it may be that some feelings of esteem for people who have good character, particularly in cases where character is assessed while engaging on a task or team, occurs in virtue of behavior that is conducive to our goals. This is to say that we may sometimes like a person in virtue of both the intrinsic and instrumental value that we see them to have.

At the most ideal end of the spectrum we have love. Velleman and others have argued that love is the ultimate affective response to the experience of the dignity of another person.[[29]](#footnote-29) Dignity refers to a special kind of intrinsic value that persons have. Objects and non-persons can have intrinsic value, but their value is generally thought to be such that they can be traded or exchanged for other like items of comparable value without incurring any real loss. To possess dignity, on the other hand, is to possess a kind of value such that one is fundamentally irreplaceable and non-fungeable. Love is an emotion that arises when we experience or confront this value or see someone or something in just this way. Liking someone or something, even when it involves appreciation in virtue of their intrinsic worth, need not involve seeing them as irreplaceable in just this way.

Just as the emotions of liking and love differ from one another in their phenomenology and motivational structure, as well as the type of value that they represent people to have, they also bring along distinctive aesthetic changes in the way that people toward which they are felt are experienced in perception. It is interesting to note that as we come to love someone, the emotion can bring along positive changes in how that person is experienced to look. To anybody who has been in love this idea should be introspectively familiar. That this phenomenon is common among people is also evident in the role it has played in culture and literature[[30]](#footnote-30).

What is more, these changes in how the person looks can mirror aspects of the value we attribute. We love someone for the particular person they are. Likewise, our beloved’s appearance becomes endearing in its uniqueness and specificity. Commonly, a physical trait that may have initially been off-putting can come to seem endearing or attractive in the context of the person whom we love. I wouldn’t want my beloved’s crooked smile replaced by more so-called objectively valued symmetry. Nor would I be satisfied with a physically upgraded version of my beloved. The only physical changes that seem desirable concern those that would coincide with his taking on the best version of himself, for example changes related to health (i.e. weight loss) or hygiene (shaving). But with respect to his unique physical features, I admire him just as he is. I may even start to admire his physical traits as I see them expressed in others. Suddenly a crooked smile is compelling precisely because it is crooked like my beloved’s. To take an example from popular culture, in Jane Eyre, Jane first finds her employer Mr. Rochester physically unappealing but as she gets to know about the particularities of his character his specific physical appeal grows, “was Mr. Rochester now ugly in my eyes? No, reader, gratitude and many associations, all pleasurable and genial made his face the object I best liked to see; his presence in a room was more cheering than the brightest flame.”

Moreover, research shows that as we come to develop more intimate bonds with our partners, not only do we find them to be more attractive, but our evaluations of the attractiveness of others also decreases in proportion to the depth of our commitment to our partner[[31]](#footnote-31)**.** One way of reading this is that our attunement to the specific physical features of our love partners manifests in a lack of interest in appearances that depart from his or hers.

I mentioned earlier that there may be multiple mechanisms by which we can experience a person as physically attractive. We might expect the mechanisms to lead to different phenomenologies. For instance, evaluative experiences of strangers who have objectively or conventionally attractive physical features, though positive, may still differ phenomenologically from the positive aesthetic experiences of people we love. When we experience our partner to be beautiful or handsome in love, part of his or her aesthetic appeal seems to involve the fact that his traits are part of the unique person he is and the aesthetic experience includes a disposition to be drawn to him. Although we may easily appreciate the beauty of a GQ model, it is for the objective appeal of his features and it is often in a detached or removed way that doesn’t bring along the same experienced behavioral dispositions toward him. Moreover it is not clear that positive esteem mediates experiences like this. I will leave it an open question whether this latter type of evaluative aesthetic experience would represent value and if so, what type.[[32]](#footnote-32)

These considerations fit well with the picture that I have been painting. There is a qualitative difference in my evaluative perception of those I love which takes into account their specificity and uniqueness. The unique beauty that I see them to have, moreover, correlates with a feeling, love, which represents my loved one to have a special kind of intrinsic value. That unique value means that the individual is non-fungeable. This is explainable by the view that my feeling of love partly constitutes my visual perception and its content becomes visually manifest in the presentation of aesthetic properties that I experience as properties of the object such as ‘beauty’.

**Conclusion**

I’ve offered a theory that explains the changes where knowledge about moral character leads to changes in evaluative judgments in terms of the influence of character assessments on evaluative perceptual experiences. I’ve argued that finding out about positive moral attributes leads us to have feelings of positive esteem for people and the positive esteem in some cases can come to partly constitute perceptual experiences. These perceptual experiences seem to attribute aesthetic qualities to the object of perception and there is reason to think that such representations can represent the perceived person to have various kinds of value. The type of value that the person is represented to have can depend as much on the moral actions of the perceived as it depends on the perceiver. In some instances, the appreciation of moral character has a strong enough influence on perception so as to change an experience of someone from seeming unattractive to seeming to be attractive, or in the other direction. So when it comes to our experiences of the attractiveness of others and the way we see people, inner beauty might be as important, if not more, than outer beauty.

One obstacle to the general view that evaluative contents can be present in perceptual experience has been that it isn’t clear where such experiences would get their evaluative contents. I have given reason to think that affective states with evaluative contents, can partly constitute perceptual experiences, and thereby lend their evaluative contents. If this can happen in the case of aesthetic evaluations of physical attractiveness, then perhaps it can happen in other types of evaluative cases such as perception of normative or prudential properties.

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1. Nisbett and Wilson, 1977 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although there have been numerous defenses of this idea, the most frequently cited appearance is in Siegel, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A lot of the work on aesthetic perception has to do with perceiving aesthetic categories, as in art (seeing a painting as an example of abstract expressionism). The idea that perceptual experiences represent aesthetic properties such as ‘beauty’ is more frequently found in work on environmental aesthetics and ethics. See. Leopold 1949 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., Sarah McGrath, 2004; Timothy Chappell,

   2008; Andrew Cullison, 2010; Justin P. McBrayer,  2010; Robert Audi, 2013; Robert Cowan, (forthcoming); Preston Werner,  (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Similar studies Paunonen 2006, Gross and Crofton 1977, Jensen-Campbell, West, & Graziano 1995, [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kniffin, K.M. & D.S. Wilson 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kniffin, K.M. & Wilson 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Another study that is somewhat between these had subjects evaluate the attractiveness of people in yearbook photos who they had once known. In this study [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Leopold 1949 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cognitive in aesthetics is the view that aesthetic experience can be enriched by being affected by what we believe, some argue this can be done by cognitive penetration and that knowledge of artistic movements and related concepts related to them can influence experience- we can see a painting as an example of “abstract expressionism”. See Stokes 2014. I’m not arguing that we can see things as falling into categories like this. My aim is to show that exposure or background knowledge can lead aesthetic evaluations (the object is: pretty, beautiful, ugly etc.) to change. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. There is evidence that familiarity increases our liking of a thing [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I want to stay neutral with respect to whether evaluative judgments can have their own cognitive phenomenology, though if they cannot then this might settle the issue. I don’t think we have to do that. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. On a scale from 1-10 with one being least attractive and 10 maximum potential attractiveness and 5-average, most people consider themselves above average, rating themselves a 6 or 7. X and Y collected data from 26,000 participants. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It may be that different cases rely on different mechanisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The view is known as cognitivism. Examples include Kenny 1963, Nussbaum 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kniffin & Wilson 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lewandowski et. al. 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Lewandowski et. al. provide the following evolutionary hypothesis, “Because physical appearance is especially important in a dating partner, it would be beneficial to see a person who is otherwise suitable as a dating partner as also more physically attractive. That is, we are likely to see a person who is desirable as a dating partner as physically attractive because desirable dating partners are expected to be, and desired to be, physically attractive. (574) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Paunonen 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Oddie 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Moreover, it seems very hard to both like something and experience it to be unattractive. Even in cases in which we had previously found something to be unattractive, liking it seems to have come along with a change in its appeal. It is common to experience what most would agree to be objectively ugly animals as cute despite, or even because of, their ugliness. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. A study by Hassein and Trope 2000 strengthens my claim that these studies reflect changes in the subject’s evaluative perceptual experiences and not just their evaluative judgments. In this study, participants looked at pictures of faces alongside personal descriptions that portrayed kindness or meanness. They were then asked to rate several facial features. Subjects claimed that the “kind” participants had shorter ears, rounder chins, fuller wider faces and higher attractiveness relative to the mean individuals. The fact that perceptible appearance qualities of specific features changed after moral knowledge was acquired suggests that it is really is visual perception that is involved in aesthetic appraisals. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Stefanucci, Gagnon & Lessard 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Bubl, Emanual et al. 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. One way in which aesthetic properties differ from color is in how they get their primary contents. Whereas in the case of color qualities, causal relations to surface reflectance properties determines content, with beauty, the most proximal explanation has to do with the evaluative emotion that partly constitutes it. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Langlois et. Al. 1995 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. DSM-V 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. reference [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Velleman, 1999. Following Kant, argues that persons have dignity in virtue of their capacity to behave according to moral law. I prefer to remain neutral on the source of the intrinsic value that persons have. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For example, in Beauty and the Beast, the beast’s physical transformation into a handsome prince occurs in response to being loved by a woman. The influence of emotion on aesthetic experiences is also discussed in Thomas Mann’s Magic Mountain. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For instance, see Johnson and Rusbult’s (1989) findings. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Some evolutionary psychologists argue that positive evaluative aesthetic experiences represent people to have value related to their evolutionary fitness based on genetics. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)