

Connecting Beauty and Love

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Abstract: In aesthetics there is a long tradition according to which beauty is the object of love. One construal of this suggests a sentimentalist theory of beauty: beauty just is the object of an emotion aptly described as love. The first step toward such a view would be to discern whether we can make sense of at least some kind of aesthetic affect as at least some kind of love. I suggest that we can by taking up a thought from Frank Sibley, according to whom aesthetic properties reflect non-aesthetic values that “go deep into human life and interests” or that “mean much to us” given the kinds of lives we live. I show how we might think that a variety of aesthetic affect represents its object as embodying life-affirming value and as such we can see a variety of aesthetic affect as a kind of love of life. It remains to be seen whether this can be leveraged into a theory of beauty narrowly construed.

Keywords: Beauty, love, aesthetic properties, emotion, aesthetic value

We might value the way a person moves, their singing, the smell of wild desert sage in the sun, the tone and cadence of a speech, the sky at sunset, the sky at night, the sky, a painting, or a song. It is tempting to say that such things can reward our engagement independently of our practical interests and that when they do it is because, in one way or another, they are beautiful. We aren't valuing something solely for its beauty when our engagement with it is rewarded by our interest in its financial worth or by the social impression it makes.

Yet when there is talk of something's aesthetic value, there is often talk of *specific* things we value—many of which we value in practice, in the sense that they inform, inspire, or move our lives in more or less profound ways, either guiding and nudging us or forming some of our more cherished ideals. We talk of the beautiful *clarity*, *power*, or *intensity* of the things that so engage us. We speak of the landscape as so beautifully *rich*, *lush*, *wild*, or *clean*. But it is common to value power, clarity, intensity, and so on independently of whatever oblique contribution they make to something's aesthetic value. It would seem that our interest in something's beauty is, in part, an interest in these things. It is implausible that aesthetic intensity, for example, has *nothing* to do with non-aesthetic intensity or perhaps with intensity considered as abstractly good. But then it seems false, or at least vague and misleading, to say that beauty rewards our attention independently of our practical interests.

It is easy to be unsure whether or not aesthetic valuing is independent of our practical interests. On the one hand, our aesthetic valuing practices can pull us out of the everyday: amazed by beauty, absorbed by the music, engrossed in the dance, awestruck by the architecture—we seem momentarily beside ourselves, our normal, practical, everyday selves, and that is indeed part of what we value when we value aesthetically. On the other hand, our aesthetic valuing practices seem to reflect who we are, our sensibility or style, in a way that is tied up with our lives as a whole, with all of its aims, complications, values, and ideals. One person loves dark comedy, dry wine, cardigans, Late Romantic music, and YA novels. Another person never engages with those things and instead loves jeeps, athleisure, anything Taylor Swift, tacos, and romantic comedies. Both count their aesthetic lives as important parts of who they are.

The tension seems to arise in when we want to say something very *general* about what valuing something's aesthetic character is not—our interest in it does not concern various practical interests—while saying something very *specific* about what it is. When we want to specify what engages us, or when we want to justify our engagement when we engage with something's beauty, we want to say more than that it is beautiful. We say things like: It is so luscious, smooth, wild, intense, powerful, and so on.

This tension appears to be reflected in a fault line that runs through the history of aesthetics, namely, the divide between those who are inclined to think of beauty's paradigmatic affect in terms of “disinterested pleasure,” and those who are inclined to think of it in terms of desire, “erôs” or “love” of some sort. Writers who emphasize disinterest, enjoyment, or pleasure often remain at a very general level, ignoring or deemphasizing beauty's canonical modifiers—richness, purity, smoothness, etc. They focus instead on overarching qualities like ‘significant form’, ‘enjoyment’, ‘disinterested pleasure’, or the capacity to elicit the ‘free play’ of imagination and understanding.

On the other hand, writers who think that aesthetic affect is more ‘interested’, desire-involving, or ‘passionate’ tend to speak in terms of the specific aesthetic properties that seem to engage such a response, or on which we focus when we want to characterize or specify what sustains our engagement. In Plato's *Symposium*—the locus classicus of the view that beauty is the object of erôs or love—Agathon describes the god Love in strongly aesthetic terms, as ‘soft’, ‘delicate’, ‘fluid’, ‘supple’, ‘balanced’, and, delightfully, as ‘consorting with flowers’: “And the exquisite coloring of his skin! The way the god consorts with flowers shows that. For he never settles in anything, be it a body or a soul, that cannot flower or has lost its bloom. His place is wherever it is flowery and fragrant; there he settles, there he stays.”¹

Another philosopher in this tradition, Edmund Burke, defines beauty as “that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it.” (Pt. III, §I) The “qualities” Burke has in mind are aesthetic: smoothness, delicacy, grace, elegance. He writes, surprisingly, that smoothness is “A quality so essential to beauty, that I do not now recollect any thing beautiful that is not smooth. ... A very considerable part of the effect of beauty is owing to this quality; indeed the most considerable.”² (§XIV, p. 103; see also §XX, p. 137) Burke is so focused on the “qualities” that attend beauty that he seems unable to shake the thought that every beautiful thing is smooth.

Why, if one is inclined to think of aesthetic valuing as interested in some sense, is there a tendency to focus on various specific or “thick” properties? And why might a focus on such properties incline one to reach, as Plato and Burke do, for something like “love” as the central affective notion in a theory of beauty?

¹ 196A–A196B Socrates does not dispute this part of Agathon's speech.

² A more recent philosopher who explicitly adopts such an approach and thinks of beauty as deeply connected to love is Guy Sircello in *A New Theory of Beauty and Love and Beauty* (1989) He writes that historically speaking, “We have taken the adjectival form *beautiful* to be irreducible, treating it like any other adjective (even though very few other adjectives admit the same kind of adverbial transformation), and have assumed beauty to be a property of things, like yellowness or rectangularity. ... I have been able to conclude [on the contrary]...that the adverbial form *beautifully* (as it applies to adjectives) is the basic linguistic form for the subject matter of a general theory of beauty.” (*A New Theory of Beauty*, 16)

This last question stands out as especially challenging because a substantial connection between beauty and love is famously difficult to make out. (Nehamas 2007) A natural place to begin is to think through some of the more detailed philosophical accounts of love and consider whether any of them can play an illuminating role here. But these accounts tend to be explicitly, and almost exclusively, focused on love between persons. In “Love as a Moral Emotion,” J. David Velleman claims that the object of love is a particular person as he embodies the universal value of personhood. He aims to understand the kind of love that exists “...between close adult friends and relations—including spouses and other life-partners...” (84). Kate Abramson and Adam Leite argue that love is a reactive emotion directed at morally laudable character traits. They define reactive attitudes in general as, “...forms of interpersonally directed emotional response...”, thereby restricting their account to interpersonal love (673). These philosophers focus on interpersonal love because they are interested in love as a “moral” phenomenon, and as Nico Kolodny writes, “The species of love that involves caring for another person is the species that most attracts the interest of moral philosophers.” (137) Kolodny is similarly concerned with love “exclusively as a state that involves caring about a person,” while acknowledging that it is “perfectly correct English to say that someone “loves” something that is not a person...” (136) His examples of love for non-persons are the love for candy apples and French people’s love for Jerry Lewis movies (137).

Here we see moral philosophers focusing on two kinds of love—strictly interpersonal love and what we might call “hedonic” love, or the “love” we profess for various objects of enjoyment and pleasure.³ But both species of love are unhelpful in understanding aesthetic affect. Non-persons can be beautiful, after all, and we can rightly love persons we do not find beautiful. Hedonic love is too wide a notion, for we hedonically love many things that we may not find beautiful—Jerry Lewis’s films, perhaps.

The challenge is among the more daunting ones we face in seeking to understand the idea that love has something to do with aesthetic affect: we are nowhere near knowing how to characterize the relevant notion of love beyond say that it is aesthetic.

Mary Mothersill clearly notes this challenge when she writes that, “... ‘falling in love’ strikes me as literal and non-hyperbolic in its application to aesthetic response within a certain range.” She writes that Plato “seems to me to be right in his perception of the link between Eros and beauty.” But she does not say how we should understand the connection. “The question,” she writes, “is worth further study.” Mothersill blends two of the questions we posed above: she punts on our question about the nature of “aesthetic love”—leaving us with the intuitive idea of ‘falling in love’ and offering Plato’s obscure notion of “eros”—and asks instead how love of a sort might be *connected* to aesthetic value.

This is an intriguing strategy. We can try to get a grip on the nature of aesthetic love by asking what the connection between our engagement with aesthetic value and ‘love’ could possibly be. And we can approach this question by focusing on the specific aesthetic properties that we associate with aesthetic response. Note that I am not pursuing a ‘sentimentalist’ theory

³ Berys Gaut makes this distinction and raises the following point in his commentary on Alexander Nehamas’s book *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. See Gaut’s “Nehamas on Beauty and Love.”

of aesthetic value here. The claim is not that aesthetic value just is what merits aesthetic love. We could not defend that view anyway without understanding at least one species of aesthetic affect as love. And that is what I am after.

We can see how Mothersill's strategy might look, and glimpse some of its promise, by considering Burke's strange claim that smoothness is *essential* to beauty, in the context of his view that beauty is that which causes love or some passion similar to it. It is tempting to simply dismiss Burke here—obviously something can be beautiful without being smooth, so how is smoothness “essential” to beauty?

But perhaps Burke is thinking that beauty is not itself a property, but a *general term* for a set of properties, each of which tends to elicit “love or some passion similar to it”. Smoothness is a member of the set and since sets are individuated by their members, it is “essential to beauty”. This may seem overly charitable to Burke, since, as we saw, he is also inclined to think that every beautiful thing is smooth. But perhaps he means that smoothness is such a paradigmatic member of the set of “qualities” that cause “love” that it dominates his thinking about beauty.

Of course, for any of this to be illuminating, we would need to know something about the connection between e.g. smoothness and “love or some passion similar to it”. I want to take up our questions in this way, by asking what the connection could be between something we may call “love” and the properties we tend to associate with aesthetic engagement of a sort. If we can cultivate a sense of what those properties are and how they are unified, then we might have a clearer sense of their connection to some kind of affect, which might allow us to diagnose the temptation to reach for the notion of love as a way of understanding a certain variety of aesthetic affect. That's how I will proceed.

A suggestive answer lies in a relatively neglected paper by the 20th century aesthetician Frank Sibley. In “Aesthetics and the Looks of Things,” Sibley makes a distinction between “aesthetic qualities” that can be admired “for themselves” and ones that cannot be so admired and asks whether anything unifies the qualities that can “stand alone” as “basic grounds” of aesthetic valuing. He notes that many of the appearances that we can take an immediate interest in are appearances with qualities of “warmth, light, brilliance, clarity, purity, regularity, cleanness, richness, softness, smoothness, or simplicity,” and he asks,

“Is it, perhaps, that the qualities and appearances that can be admired aesthetically for themselves must be ones which somehow, putting aesthetic questions aside, are vitally involved in human experience? Awareness of and concern with [these qualities] go deep into human life and interests. ... It suggests that qualities that can be objects of aesthetic interest *reflect our vital concerns and the sort of creatures we are.*” (31, emphasis added)

Sibley's thought is that the “qualities” we can take a basic aesthetic interest in are unified by a relation they bear to our non-aesthetic “vital concerns”. Sibley doesn't just use the term “vital concerns” for these “non-aesthetic” interests: he says they concern things that “go deep into human life and interests,” are “of concern to us for themselves,” are things we “cannot survive without,” are “what touches home,” and which “mean much to us”. Sibley admits that he's offering “a very tentative suggestion” (32) rather than a worked-out theory, but let's see if we can work out a theory.

Here are some paradigmatically beautiful things: sunsets, waves, and melodic sounds. When we describe a sunset's beauty, we often describe the character of its light and color, which tends to be beautifully soft, warm, glowing, and harmoniously blended. And we describe a wide range of beautiful things similarly: the beautiful *softness* of someone's skin or the beautiful *warmth* of a room's light. We might say that a series of waves is beautifully rhythmic, clear, and smooth. And many of these terms we find ourselves using again when we notice the beauty of sounds, which we describe as beautifully harmonious, rhythmic, smooth, pure, and clear, among other things. Even when we consider the beauty of mathematics we find, strikingly, many of the same terms: proofs and equations are said to be beautifully clear, simple, harmonious, pure, and unified. More generally, when we consider the beauty of paradigmatically beautiful items, we alight upon a range of *aesthetic terms* that we tend to use to describe the character of the beautiful things we find.

This is not to say that any given experience of beauty is focused exclusively on properties that these terms pick out, or that we could have an experience of beauty that is focused exclusively on any one of them, or even that we are often aware of these aesthetic properties as such when we experience beauty. The thought is that our dealings with beauty—our thought, talk, writing, creative production, engagement, experience—involve a range of salient features that we are able, if only sometimes, to pick out, discuss, or contemplate further. They are the terms that are likely to be at issue when we dwell on the beauty we find, that we are likely to mention or focus on in conversation with friends, appreciation, and criticism.

Sibley arrives at a similar list of what I will call “paradigmatic beauties” by employing a simple test. To apply it, we join a characteristic expression of our finding something beautiful with a candidate aesthetic term and consider whether the resulting exclamation is immediately intelligible. So, imagine someone observing an object or a scene and saying, “It's so beautifully ___!” And fill in the blank with various adjectives. Sometimes the result is immediately intelligible, as with (the grammatically correct form of) ‘purity’, ‘warmth’, ‘simplicity’, ‘power’, ‘brilliance’, ‘translucence’, ‘openness’, ‘radiance’, ‘lushness’, ‘airiness’, and ‘clarity’. These are all static properties, but certain dynamic properties pass the test as well, for example, ‘flow’, and ‘vibrancy’. Sometimes the result is not immediately intelligible, as with ‘angular’, ‘square’, ‘serrated’, or ‘bulky’, and sometimes the results are somewhat mixed, as with ‘layered’ or ‘flat’.

If someone were to say of something that it is beautifully *angular*, we might wonder what it is they find beautiful in the angularity. Paul Ziff (1979) writes:

“Look at the dried dung!

What for?

If I had said ‘Look at the sunset!’ would you have asked ‘What for?’?”

Ziff notes that “Sunsets are customary objects of aesthetic attention. ... But not everything is: not soiled linen greasy dishes bleary eyes false teeth not excrement.” (Ziff's lack of commas, not mine.) Sometimes, when we do ask people to look at the dung, it seems unlikely that we could explain its aesthetic interest. It is not obvious what we could say to support our claim that something is beautifully bulky—it's just so *bulky*—or square. Sometimes an explanation seems more forthcoming, perhaps with a little effort, as with angularity or flatness. Of course, we *can* question someone's aesthetic interest in purity, smoothness, etc., but the thought is that

such an interest does not invite questioning in the way that an interest in “beautiful bulkiness” does. And this is presumably not simply because we are more familiar with talk of the former.

So what, if anything, unifies the paradigmatic beauties? This where Sibley’s suggestion comes in, in the form of a question: “Is it, perhaps, that the qualities and appearances that can be admired aesthetically for themselves must be ones which somehow, putting aesthetic questions aside, are vitally involved in human experience?” (31) Here Sibley introduces the thought that there is an important connection between certain aesthetic interests and certain “vital” interests. He elaborates: “It suggests that qualities that can be objects of aesthetic interest reflect our vital concerns and the sort of creatures we are.” (31)

Sibley doesn’t just use the term “reflect” in this context. He writes that certain properties “indicate,” “suggest,” and “stand for” certain non-aesthetic properties. Sibley posits a relation between our interest in a thing’s aesthetic character and certain “vital concerns” or things that “mean much to us” or “go deep into human life and interests”—and the relation he posits is that of “reflection”, “indication”, “suggestion”, or “standing for”. The paradigmatically beautiful properties are those that “reflect” certain non-aesthetic values—those that “mean much to us”.

In using ‘reflect’, ‘indicate’, ‘suggest’, and ‘stand for’, Sibley seems to be struggling to find an appropriate term for the way in which we are aware of certain non-aesthetic goods in the kind of aesthetic valuing that concerns him. I will adopt the vague term “reflect”. It’s important to note the temptation to use semantic, or semantic-like notions to describe this aspect of aesthetic experience: we want to say more than that certain interests *inform* or *cause us to have* certain aesthetic experiences—we want to say that those values are *reflected, suggested, hinted at, or indicated* by the object of aesthetic regard. We want to say that, in experiencing the beautiful object, we are put in mind of, however obliquely, our “vital concerns”. It’s important because it seems that, for Sibley, our vital concerns do not simply *cause us* to value some other thing. Rather, our aesthetically valuing certain things *just is*, in part, our valuing some ‘non-aesthetic’ things that ‘mean much to us’.

The terms we use to talk about paradigmatic beauty have a non-aesthetic literal meaning. We might notice the clarity of a body of water, the smoothness of a stone, and so on. What is striking, and what Sibley is drawing our attention to, is how strongly correlated the literal meanings of the terms that pass his test are with non-aesthetic properties that positively qualify human life-affirming goods, or goods the pursuit of which gives human life its basic character and cadence—especially water, food, and shelter. As human beings, we have a “vital interest” in not just water but *clean, pure, and flowing* water; we’re interested in *warm* environments, *open* space, *smooth, clean* surfaces, *vibrant* flowers and fruits. These are all properties that are “vitally involved” in basic human life. We literally “cannot survive without them”; they “go deep into human life and interests.”

The challenge is to find a reasonable way of picking out these properties while setting aesthetic matters aside, so as to use them in an account of the unity of the “paradigmatic” beauties. Perhaps the first thought that Sibley’s discussion suggests is to consider what it makes sense to value from the point of view of basic human well-being. By “basic human well-being” I mean the well-being we ought to seek solely in virtue of our being human beings. What does it make sense to value in our lives simply as human beings? At the very least, it makes sense to place a special emphasis on the things we need in order to remain alive, safe, and well: water, shelter,

food, and companionship. But we don't just need these things; we need them under a certain description. When it comes to water, we ought to value clear, clean, pure water (not dark, mucky, slimy, opaque water). When it comes to dwelling: warm, solid, open, smooth, clear, and clean spaces and surfaces (not jagged, cold, irregular surfaces with dense vegetation or obscured visibility). In this way, clarity, warmth, smoothness, openness, and so on feature among the non-aesthetic values that support basic human life.

Now consider properties that are correlated with conditions that are inhospitable or indifferent to human life, and so do not, or at least do not as obviously or generally, support or affirm basic human life: dryness, haziness, iciness, itchiness. We should expect such features not to figure in paradigmatic beauty, and they clearly do not. To be sure, desert landscapes, snowy winter days, vast night skies, and raw wool blankets can all be beautiful, but their beauty is not due to their respective dryness, coldness, darkness, or itchiness. We value the *purity*, *smoothness*, or *softness* of the white snow, the *simplicity*, *smoothness*, and *regularity* of rolling desert sands, and the *clarity* and *richness* of a night sky—and these are all paradigmatic beauties.

Let's say that something is a *life-affirming value* to the extent that valuing it supports life of a certain character. The character of a life is given by the characteristic actions, reactions, thoughts, and habits of the being living that life. The character of a *human* life, just as such, will center around, though of course it won't be limited to, activities related to certain forms of food, water, and dwelling. The thought is that the paradigmatic beauties are those features of appearances that "reflect" our human life-affirming values. When we talk about the beauty of waves, we pick out smoothness because it is reflected in the character of the waves, and smoothness—aesthetic questions aside—is a human life-affirming value.

I am not claiming that *if* something is a human life-affirming value, *then* it is a paradigmatic beauty. I am exploring the thought that something's being a human life-affirming value is a good guide to its having a counterpart among the paradigmatic beauties. And more to the point, Sibley's thought is that *if* something is a paradigmatic beauty, *then* perhaps with some effort we should be able to find its counterpart among the human life-affirming values.

However, as noted above, our interest in aesthetic value is not limited to paradigmatic beauty. Among the features that fail Sibley's test are properties that *would* pass, given an appropriate explanation—they are intelligible as beauties, just not "immediately" so. An interest in "non-paradigmatic" aesthetic value—the beautiful *fast* look of a car, the movingly *raw* music, or the incredible *wild* look of an outfit—is open to questioning in a way that an interest in the paradigmatic beauties isn't.

But in many cases, we expect such questions to have good answers. We don't necessarily reject these interests as unintelligible, improper, or due to bad or confused taste. But it is not obvious what one might find *aesthetically good*—as opposed to just, say, exciting or interesting—about the 'fast' look, or 'raw' sound, and we're open to some sort of explanation as to what it is. However, the explanation cannot appeal to the *human* life-affirming values. Fastness, wildness, rawness, and so on do not rank very high, if at all, among the human life-affirming values.

What, if anything, explains the unity of these "non-paradigmatic" beauties? And given such an explanation, is there a general unifying account of beauty, both paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic?

We use a variety of terms to express our ‘non-paradigmatic’ aesthetic interests. We might say that something is ‘natural’, ‘raw’, ‘wild’, ‘restrained’, ‘tight’, ‘dynamic’, or ‘austere’. Like the terms for paradigmatic beauty these terms have their everyday, non-aesthetic uses.

Suppose someone does inquire about one’s interest in, say, the beauty of an austere room or the aesthetics of a fast-looking car. What is the best way to make one’s interest intelligible? What kind of answer should we accept or find worthy of further thought and conversation? Consider the following responses:

- (1) I find the room beautifully austere-looking because austerity is so instrumentally valuable.
- (2) I find the room beautifully austere-looking because my friend likes austerity and I like my friend.
- (3) I find the room beautifully austere-looking because it brings to mind other things I like, namely, restraint, simplicity, and calmness.
- (4) I find the room beautifully austere-looking because it reflects (some of) my values, namely restraint, simplicity, and calmness.

Response (1) fails. It is obvious that something can be instrumentally good without being aesthetically good in slightest. Response (2) fails because the pervasive fact of aesthetic diversity. Taste vary widely, even among friends. The fact that one’s friend finds something aesthetically good might be a reason for you to hate it! Response (3) gets closer, but mere association with other valuable things is too thin a basis on which to ground one’s aesthetic valuing. I might associate a film with popcorn, or a sunny day with cake, but I can’t explain my aesthetic interest in the film or sunny day in terms of my love of popcorn or cake. The last response, (4), sounds like an explanation of an interest in the room’s aesthetic value.

Sibley shares this intuition in suggesting the following account of an aesthetic interest in the fast look of a car: “When we do praise something for being, *e.g.*, fast-looking, we notice that ‘fast’ is not confined...to its instrumental value; it suggests dash, bravado, *a way of life valued for itself*.” We understand what someone finds aesthetically good in the way a car looks when they relate its looking ‘fast’ to a certain boldness, or bravado that one might value as part of a ‘way of life’, or as part of one’s being a certain kind of person. Likewise, we understand what someone sees in the pronounced angularity of a sculpture or design object when they relate its angular look to a certain ‘resoluteness’ or ‘steadfastness’. We understand what someone values in the ‘wild’ look of a haircut or outfit when they relate the way it looks to brazen freedom or openness. We might not, ourselves, take such an interest in the fast-look of the car, or the wild look of a person’s style, but in hearing such an explanation we understand why someone might.

This suggests that the *non*-paradigmatic beauties are features that reflect ways of life we value for themselves—and for ourselves. These personal values are values *of the person* in two senses: they are values a person can reflectively own or identify with, and they are values we might aspire to cultivate or embody—they define the kind of life we think it is worth our living, or the kind of person we think it is worth our being, in the sense that they are the features we aspire to cultivate in ourselves and actively realize in our lives—not merely as human beings, but as the individuals we are. They might be ways of life that we already value and want to continue pursuing, or they might be ways of life that we aspire to cultivate.

Why can we explain or discuss our interest in something's beauty by relating it to our personal values? The simplest answer, if available, would seem to be that our personal values are *of the same kind as*, or *deeply analogous to*, the kind of value that unifies the paradigmatic beauties, that is, our human life-affirming values. It would be reasonable to consider a range of *non-paradigmatic* properties *aesthetic values* if we could understand them as reflecting values that are of the same kind as, or at least deeply analogous to, those that unify the paradigmatic beauties. In this way, paradigmatic beauties and non-paradigmatic beauties would form a class of aesthetic properties unified by a deep similarity, or even uniformity, in the life-affirming character of the values that underlie them.

I think this answer is available. The kind of interest paradigmatic beauty reflects is an interest in things that affirm life as the kind of creature we are. *Non-paradigmatic* beauty reflects interests that affirm life as the kind of *individual* we think it is worth our being. Where the human life-affirming values are things that “mean much to us” as human beings, the individual life-affirming values “mean much to us” as the kind of individual we think it is worth our being.

In other words, both kinds of value play the same kind of life-affirming role, one with respect to our status as human beings, the other with respect to our status as individuals. This gives us a unified account of a wide range of aesthetic properties under the banner of beauty. Putting together the theses of this and the last section yields the following thesis:

Unity Thesis: beauty reflects life-affirming value, either human life-affirming value or individual life-affirming value.

I will leave the term ‘reflection’ vague. Recall the terms Sibley used in addition to “reflects”: “indicate,” “suggest,” and “stand for”. These terms suggest, at least, that Sibley is thinking that the “non-aesthetic” life-affirming values do not necessarily inhere in the experienced object. Something about the object *hints at* the value, or, perhaps, our experience of the object is organized by the value in such a way that the value seems present in or embodied by it. Perhaps it's a kind of metaphorical seeing-as. The experience is importantly affective. Consider our experience of, say, sharp edges and spikes. We might say that these objects “suggest”, “indicate”, or “reflect” danger or violence because our seeing them is combined with the displeasure or emotional unease or fear we feel at the thought of being harmed; and this is true even when we know they are made of rubber, merely depicted, practically inaccessible, or harmless studs on a belt. Perhaps, then, we have a similar kind of affective response to certain features of experience that can explain the sense in which they “reflect” life-affirming value.

It is possible that there is an evolutionary story to tell about our interest in human life-affirming value. Maybe there is an evolutionary story behind our valuing the aesthetic ‘reflection’ of those properties. There does seem to be a historical fact about the valuing practices that emerged from our interest in paradigmatic beauty. The cultural practice of beauty valuing, of finding and creating beautiful things and imitating, sharing, discussing, and attaching ourselves to them, preceded the more general cultural practice of aesthetic valuing. Now the practice of aesthetic valuing dominates and can even override whatever more primitive interests we might have had in beauty valuing. One might find oneself attracted to sunsets or flowers—and so be lightly pulled into valuing their paradigmatic beauty—but regard them as maudlin, basic, or, I dunno, too unpunk.

In any case, let's remember what we are up to here. We were hoping to understand a certain tendency to associate aesthetic affect of a sort with love. We approached this question by focusing on the specific aesthetic properties that we associate with beauty when we experience and discuss it, in the hopes that a philosophical grip on them would help us understand the temptation to associate aesthetic affect with love—which would in turn shed light on the nature of that 'love'. With the unity thesis in hand we can take another step and ask why we might be tempted to reach for the notion of love when thinking about beauty.

In the history of aesthetics, as we noted with Plato and Burke, love is often construed as an affective state (rather than e.g. a valuing relationship). It is common to think of aesthetic affect as a kind of "pleasure". But it's unnatural to think of love, the affective state, as a kind of pleasure. While it might involve pleasure of some sort, it is more natural to think of it as an emotion. The most salient difference between pleasure and emotion is that emotions typically have associated complex evaluative representations. The emotion of envy, for example, is associated with the representation of a person as, roughly, unfairly possessing what one desires but lacks. Philosophers and psychologists disagree about whether emotional representation is a belief, judgment, or something less committal like a "presentation" or "construal".⁴ These complications aside, understanding aesthetic affect as involving an emotion aptly called 'love' requires at minimum that we specify the emotion's representational content.

So how might we do that? The unity thesis developed above provides a straightforward answer: the emotion represents its target as *embodying life-affirming value*. Our affective response is in part an emotional experience that construes something as embodying life-affirming value. This representation does not specify *particular* life-affirming values. For example, it does not cite a specific value like *bravado*; it is not the construal of a thing as presenting the life-affirming value *of bravado*. The emotion's content is not specific in this way; it represents something as embodying life-affirming value—it is a further, and sometimes difficult, task to determine what specific value(s) might be involved—a task aided by reflection on experience, repeat exposure, further discrimination, social exchange, and so on.

Relatedly, the view does not require that one have personal values that are already formulated, conscious, explicit, or understood. This would be incompatible with the patent fact that the aesthetic engagement can *inform us* of our values and *present us* with new ones—ones we were only vaguely aware of, if at all. Aesthetic engagement can shape the kind of person we are, or bring values to awareness, and thereby have a kind of life or self-affirming or changing significance.⁵ Aesthetic experience might do this by having the affective character defined above, that is, by representing the world as presenting life-affirming value—we then look closer, inspect and investigate, and with luck are able to say something about what captivates us; we might notice that it is beautifully *pure, clear, bold, spare, or alive* and thereby come to a kind of grasp of what life-affirming values speak to us and how they can be present in what we wear, hear, or see in our surroundings.

This gives us a sense of how there might be a connection between specific aesthetic properties

⁴ For discussion of these issues see D'Arms & Jacobson (2003)

⁵ For discussion of this, see my "On the Interest in Beauty and Disinterest," *Philosophers' Imprint*, 2016.

and a certain kind of emotion. What, then, are the prospects for thinking of this emotion as *love* in particular? Recall the central challenge to the view that beauty is the object of love. The challenge points out that interpersonal love is too narrow to take aesthetic value as its object, and hedonic love is too broad. To make sense of the view that aesthetic value is substantially related to love we must find a notion of love that can play the relevant role.

Given the view just developed, I think we can discern a third option, in addition to interpersonal and hedonic love. Aesthetic affect (of this sort) is, in a sense, a kind of love of life or of being alive—either as a human being or as the individual one is or aspires to be. To feel that this aesthetic emotion is to feel that one is in touch with life-affirming value. But to be in touch with life-affirming value in this way is to regard one's life as affirmed—it is to see the world in the light of the thought that life is worth living.

Aesthetic affect is, in this way, a kind of love of life but one that does not carry the negative connotations often associated with that term. To love one's life is not to feel a kind of ethically questionable self-love. "Self-love" can, and in philosophy often does, carry a negative connotation of self-indulgence, narcissism, or egotism. But self-love can also take the form of a concern for the things that one takes to really matter in one's life, as opposed to a desire to satisfy one's immediate desires, impulses, or cravings (Frankfurt 2006).

On this way of thinking about the connection between love and aesthetic affect, engagement with aesthetic value of a sort does not reward our attention 'independently of our practical interests'. Rather, aesthetic affect depends on some of our deeper and more cherished practical interests—those that inform and affirm our human and individual lives. Aesthetic affect can, in this way, distance us from other less significant, more everyday, practical, or fleeting interests and put us in touch with life-affirming value.

One source of the temptation to associate beauty and love, then, comes down to the connection between certain aesthetic properties and the life-affirming character of their non-aesthetic counterparts. Aesthetic value, when it affects us, can easily overwhelm us with a sense of life's value, even when we lack a firm grasp of it in our lives. Perhaps that is one reason why, when we think in more general terms about aesthetic value we are inclined to say that it rewards us independently of our practical interests. It can seem to reveal the general worthiness of being alive, to tap us into a more general sense of value and so of freedom, and we can be susceptible to this even when our everyday interests are thwarted, unclear, distant, or practically obscured.

Thinking about love in this way reveals a species of interpersonal love that appears to be neglected in the ethics literature. We have characterized aesthetic love as an emotion that construes something as embodying life-affirming value. This is obviously different from any view that does not construe interpersonal love as an emotion (*e.g.* Kolodny's view of love as a valuing relationship). Aesthetic love is also different from love as a *moral* emotion because aesthetic love can be a response to non-persons and because moral values are not the same as life-affirming values. Nor does aesthetic love track a positive reaction to morally laudable traits. Aesthetic love is a response to the appearance of life-affirming value, and we might not cull our life-affirming values from the moral domain.

If we were to use this theory to peer into the domain of interpersonal emotion, I think we would

have to seek an emotion that is a reaction to the thought that *this individual* is a life-affirming value. The interpersonal analog of aesthetic love is a response to the thought that the character of one's own individuality shall be informed by, responsive to, or entwined with that of another. But this is not just a response to a pleasing face or seductive body. An *individual* here is a special kind of thing—one that captivates you in their capacity to find something aesthetically good and in the way they bring that capacity to bear on and shape their life. In other words, the object of interpersonal aesthetic love is a person *as* a lover of the aesthetic, as someone who has their own way of engaging with life-affirming value in things. So the object of love is someone who, in view of the expressed character of their own life-affirming values—their individuality—we construe as embodying life-affirming value. It is someone we see as beautiful, and as beautifully individual.

There is an affinity with Velleman's view here, but for him, love is a response to a person's rational nature as expressed in their "empirical persona"—their gait, the quality of their voice, the way they dress or socialize. In this way Velleman characterizes love as a moral emotion that sees through a manifest persona to autonomy itself, a value shared by all other persons. Velleman draws our attention to the affective aesthetic dimension of love, but characterizes it in terms of wonder, awe, and the sublime.⁶ The emotion I am discussing here, in contrast, is not one of wonder, awe, or the sublime, which are all phenomenologically characterized by a 'stepping back' or a 'beholding'—indeed, for Velleman, love is the emotional complement of respect. Aesthetic love is *inspiring* in a way that *engages* us toward its objects. Aesthetic love inspires us to do things, to imitate, riff, repeat, share, discuss or use as a medium of self-expression.

The view in the ethics of love literature that I think comes closest to this is Benjamin Bagley's view that interpersonal love is a matter of valuing someone as a partner in "deep improvisation," which involves sharing "fundamental values" and working together to embody those values. His main example is Catherine and Heathcliff's shared love of "wildness" in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.⁷ But Bagley's view emphasizes *sharing* fundamental values. At least when it comes to aesthetic love, sharing values is too strong because aesthetic interactions can involve coherent or complimentary values. Aesthetic lovers might have compatible ends without sharing the same fundamental values. In aesthetic life, which involves so much variation in sensibility and style, we can even connect with people whose individualities clash with our own, finding something loveable even in strange or unusual individuals. Aesthetic love is a response we might have to a life-long partner or lover, but it is also a response we might have to a person or group we meet by chance—it is a response to strangers and potential friends as much as it is a response to our closest confidants. We might not feel this way often, but, I submit, it's a beautiful thing when we do.

A sentimentalist theory of beauty might say that beauty just is the object of the emotion outlined here. Of course, whether or not that is right, there is much more to aesthetic life than engagement with beauty, in part because beauty is not the only sort of aesthetic value. Still, beauty anchors many aesthetic lives and although the practice of aesthetic valuing has expanded far beyond it, beauty, and the aesthetic love it inspires, still lies deep in its heart and firmly in its past. So a question lingers about why an emotion aptly called love—one which we can direct toward each other as much as can toward objects—plays, and has played, such an important role

⁶ On the sublime, see "Sociality and Solitude" in *Philosophical Explorations*, 2013, p. 8.

⁷ See "Loving Someone in Particular," *Ethics* Vol. 125, No. 2, January 2015

in the practice of aesthetic valuing.

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