

# Beautiful traits do not yet make beautiful people

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## *1. Introduction*

People can come to seem to us more beautiful the better we get to know their personalities. Some have taken this phenomenon to be evidence for a moral kind of beauty. According to the *moral beauty view*, morally valuable character traits, good manners, or, to use a catch-all phrase, moral virtues, realise moral beauty. Moral beauty should, on this view, be distinguished from the beauties realised merely by the way someone looks or sounds; instead they are realised by the moral properties of people and their actions. The moral beauty view is a philosophical view which tries to make precise the way in everyday life and language we describe and evaluate people using aesthetic terms. Its main attraction is that it can explain why we can correctly and literally evaluate people's moral features in aesthetic terms. But in offering this explanation, the view has broader philosophical ramifications too, some of which are potentially revisionary. On the one hand the view's central claim that there is a *moral* kind of beauty has been taken to push the boundaries of the aesthetic beyond the world of art and sensible beauty, into the non-sensory realm of morality and virtue. On the other hand, the view forges a tight connection between values that many philosophers take to be independent, namely moral value and aesthetic value.

How revisionary the moral beauty view is ultimately turns on exactly how the view is best articulated. And here I see a difficulty. I will argue that the standard articulation of the moral beauty view faces a problem that forces us to look for alternative ways of articulating the view. I present one such alternative, and show that on the alternative articulation the moral beauty view is not as revisionary as it is standardly taken to be.

## *2. The standard articulation of the moral beauty view*

The standardly accepted version of the moral beauty view has been articulated by Berys Gaut (2007:144-127) and more recently by Panos Paris (2018a, 2018b, 2019). According to these authors, the following fact about the moral virtues explains that people (real or fictional) can come to seem to us more beautiful the better we get to know their personalities:

MBV<sub>standard</sub>: If a trait  $t$  is a moral virtue, then  $t$  is beautiful

I am using ‘moral virtue’ as a catch-all phrase for people’s morally valuable traits, habits, and other good dispositions. Perhaps some want to be more restrictive, and limit the view only to virtues ‘proper’ (cf. Paris 2018a). My argument remains neutral about the precise range of traits the moral beauty view covers. What matters is that on the standard articulation the assumption *that moral virtues are beautiful* is used to explain why someone’s personality and character can have a bearing on that person’s beauty. People are beautiful—morally beautiful—insofar as they possess morally virtuous traits. The courageous are beautiful because they are courageous.<sup>1</sup> This view can explain the fact that, as we get to know a person’s moral traits better, our experience and aesthetic evaluation of this person tends to change: what could happen is that we gradually become attentive to traits that realise beauty, and integrate our aesthetic appreciation of those traits with our overall aesthetic evaluation of the person possessing the traits.

How Gaut and Paris articulate it, the moral beauty view has significant implications both for our understanding of the domain of aesthetic value, and for how we think about the way moral and aesthetic value are entangled. Specifically, on this standard articulation the view implies that non-sensible dispositional traits such as virtues fall within the domain of aesthetically valuable things. Moreover, the view would imply that some form of ‘ethicism’ is true. Ethicism is the view that, at least in some cases, something has aesthetic value insofar it has moral value (see Gaut 2007 for a discussion and defence of ethicism about works of art). The standard articulation of the moral beauty view implies that ethicism is true, because the virtues are (by definition) morally valuable, and according to the standard articulation the virtues are to that extent aesthetically valuable as well.

Note that the view, so understood, still aims at describing a moral beauty of people. It is important to acknowledge that the moral beauty view does not imply that this moral kind of beauty is always easy to discern in people, or that it cannot be outweighed by aesthetic values realised merely in the way a person looks or sounds. Attributions of beauty to a person on the basis of someone’s moral traits may be *pro tanto* attributions, i.e. attributions that someone is beautiful to an extent. But a central claim of defenders of the moral beauty view is that it implies that if a person has a morally virtuous trait, then the person is (to that extent) beautiful (Doran 2019:396). Paris, for example, writes that “those who possess moral virtues are more beautiful in so far as they have a more beautiful character, while the vicious are ugly in so far as their character is ugly.” (Paris 2018a:655; see also Paris 2019)

Although the intuition that there is a moral kind of beauty (and a moral kind of ugliness) has a long history in philosophy (see Paris 2019:396), there is no question that the moral beauty view is currently controversial. Not only does it claim to break with a traditional conception of the aesthetic as being limited to art and the sensible, it also assumes a controversial conceptual connection between ethics and aesthetics. A defender of the view would be right to stress that, in the latter case, this connection is articulated as a relatively weak one. The standard articulation merely presents a sufficient condition for a character trait to be beautiful, namely if it is a moral virtue. In other words, the view does not make being a moral virtue a necessary condition for

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<sup>1</sup> Doran (2021) calls this the ‘trait’ conception of the moral beauty view, and distinguishes it from a ‘character’ and an ‘effect’ conception. Only the ‘trait’ conception—what I call the standard articulation—has received wide attention.

being a beautiful character trait; something that would be too strong, given that personal quirks can be beautiful without being moral virtues. Moreover, the view also does not identify moral virtue with beauty; for all we know, moral virtues might in part be non-aesthetic in nature; for example, the moral goodness of courage may consist entirely in how courage promotes happiness. All that the moral beauty view says is that, besides being morally good, the moral virtues are beautiful as well. Nonetheless, this does still embody a substantive way of thinking about the connection between moral value and aesthetic value, because it rules out the ‘autonomist’ view that the moral value of a trait is independent of its aesthetic value.

### 3. *The inheritance problem*

What then is the problem I see with the standard way of articulating the moral beauty view? The problem is that it leaves obscure how people can inherit the beauty of their virtues. Yet the prime purpose of the view is to explain that people can be beautiful because of their morally valuable attitudes or dispositions. Hence, the view does not explain what it purports to explain.

The problem arises because the standard articulation assigns aesthetic value first and foremost to the moral virtues themselves and not to the persons that possess these virtues. Yet, property possession is not a transitive relation. If A possesses B, and B possesses C, then it may still turn out that A does not possess C. More specifically, it is no general principle that a person inherits all the properties possessed by their virtues. Consider the following example, which uses the virtue courage to illustrate that people don’t generally inherit the properties of their virtues. Let’s suppose I am courageous and that my courage is much less heartfelt than the courage of Florence Nightingale. In that situation, it is obviously not the case that I am much less heartfelt than Nightingale’s courage—what would it even mean? In this example we have a virtue (courage) that possesses a property (being heartfelt), but it is not the case that the person possessing the virtue also possesses the property (people are just not the right sort of thing to be heartfelt). Paris writes that it simply follows from the assumption that moral virtues possess beauty, that having a morally virtuous trait makes one beautiful (Paris 2019: 397; see also Gaut 2007: 117). But in fact it does not follow from this assumption, precisely because it is not true that a person inherits all the properties possessed by their virtues. Hence, in its standard articulation the moral beauty view leaves a gap between a value attributable to virtues and a value attributable to people. The defender of the moral beauty view would need to offer an additional explanation of why the virtuous inherit the beauty of their morally virtuous traits. Merely assuming the moral beauty view, as articulated above, is not enough. Call this the *inheritance problem* for the moral beauty view.

The inheritance problem is a problem of precise articulation. In everyday language we may well be imprecise in our attributions of aesthetic or moral properties, and fail to distinguish clearly between the aesthetic or moral value of certain character traits, and the aesthetic or moral value of the people possessing those traits. However, the moral beauty view is a philosophical view which tries to make precise why we can rightly use aesthetic terms to evaluate moral characteristics of people. Hence we should demand of

it precision. The inheritance problem arises because the standard articulation of the moral beauty view makes a muddle of the relations between people, virtues, and beauty.

One could try to deal with such a formal problem by introducing new substantive philosophical assumptions. For example, one could posit that there is something special about beauty, such that it ‘trickles down,’ in contrast to other properties such as being heartfelt. Just as a square painting with a beautiful round part is, to that extent, itself beautiful but not round, it could be maintained that a person with a heartfelt beautiful trait is, to that extent, itself beautiful though not heartfelt. This would be a substantive thesis in its own right, and one of dubious standing. Matsys’s *The Ugly Duchess* in The National Gallery—an ugly painting with beautiful parts—seems an immediate counterexample. But either way, I think that introducing this substantive trickling-down assumption would take us away from the moral beauty view, which says that specifically *the virtues* make someone beautiful, and not some more general property of beauty. As I will now show, the inheritance problem can be dealt with by offering an alternative articulation of the moral beauty view.

#### *4. A revised articulation of the moral beauty view*

The inheritance problem for the moral beauty view is not insurmountable. The standard articulation of the moral beauty view developed by Gaut and Paris gets into trouble because it assumes that the idea of a beautiful character trait is to be understood in terms of the *possession of beauty by a character trait or virtue*. This way of thinking gives rise to the inheritance problem. If instead we conceive of beautiful character traits as *ways for people to possess beauty*, we see that the problem disappears.

On this alternative way of articulating the moral beauty view, the conceptual connection between virtue and beauty is not the connection between an object (the virtue) and its properties or values (beauty, among others), but the connection between a property or value (beauty) and one of its species, modes, or ways of being (the virtues, among others). To put it simply: a virtue is a way of being beautiful.

MBV<sub>revised</sub>: If a trait *t* is a moral virtue, then *t* is a way of being beautiful

If instead of assuming that someone’s virtues are beautiful, we assume that a person’s virtues are ways in which a person can be beautiful, then we can see that the problem of how a person inherits the values realised by their virtues does not even arise. This is because the aesthetic value realised by a virtue would already be conceived of as a value of the person that has the virtue. ‘You are beautiful’ would follow logically from ‘you are courageous’, just as ‘this is red’ follows logically from ‘this is crimson’, or ‘this is a rational being’ follows logically from ‘this is a human being.’ The conceptual connections in all these cases would stem from some kind of conceptual hierarchy or ordering, which determines that satisfying the more specific concept (being courageous) implies satisfying the more general or overarching concept (being beautiful). As a consequence, the moral beauty view logically implies that if a person has a morally virtuous trait, then the person is (to that extent) beautiful.

Note that this revised articulation of the moral beauty view still is relatively weak. It only states a sufficient condition. It allows for beauties that are not moral virtues, for example the beauties realised merely by the way someone looks or sounds. It also does not claim that the moral goodness of the virtues consists in their being beauties: for all we know, moral virtues are beauties that have moral value because of the way they contribute to human happiness.<sup>2</sup> All the same, the revised articulation still clearly captures the idea that admirable character traits, good manners, or, more generally, moral virtues, realise moral beauty.

Whereas the standard articulation presents moral beauty as merely a beauty due to something with moral value, a clear advantage of the revised articulation of the moral beauty view is that it actually manages to define a moral *kind* of beauty, namely a beauty that consists in being virtuous.

##### 5. Differences between the standard and revised articulations

Does this revised articulation deviate significantly from the standard articulation? Clearly, even apart from the fact that the latter faces the inheritance problem and the former does not, the views are not interchangeable. A seeming consequence of the standard articulation offered by Gaut and Paris is that it is *a priori* that moral beauty is not sensible beauty (Gaut 2007:124ff; Paris 2018a: 643; Doran 2021: 397). If it is a conceptual truth that virtues are non-sensible dispositions or traits, then any beauty the virtues have must be non-sensible as well. (An implicit assumption here is that possessing a sensible quality is sufficient for being sensible.) This makes it that on their articulation of the view, the scope of the aesthetic includes non-sensible things, which would mark a significant shift in paradigm. But this *a priori* argument for non-sensible beauty evaporates if we conceive of the virtues as forms of beauty possessed by people. Clearly, people are sensible objects: we can see, hear, smell, and touch them. Many of the beauties people possess are sensible as well—indeed, *looking good* is a paradigm of human beauty as well as a paradigm of sensible beauty. So if virtues are beauties possessed by people, it does not seem *a priori* that moral beauty is not a sensible beauty. Instead, it seems an empirical matter, arguably on a par with the question whether human beings can taste propylthiouracil (Bartoshuk 1994). This shows that the two articulations are clearly not interchangeable.<sup>3</sup>

How does the revised articulation determine the conceptual connection between moral value and aesthetic value? A consequence of the standard articulation was that, at least in some cases, for  $x$  to be morally valuable suffices for  $x$  to be aesthetically valuable: if a trait is morally valuable, i.e. a virtue, then it is (to that extent) aesthetically valuable. This would mean that a form of ethicism is true: at least for character traits, if trait  $x$  is

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<sup>2</sup> Note, even a weaker formulation of the moral beauty view would offer the desired explanation: *some* moral virtues are ways of being beautiful. This even weaker formulation allows there to be moral virtues that are not beauties at all, but it would still explain how virtues can contribute to a person's beauty.

<sup>3</sup> The views are also clearly logically different. Viewed purely extensionally, Gaut's and Paris's view can be represented as expressing that necessarily the set of *virtues* is a subset of the set of beautiful things, whereas the revised conception expresses that necessarily the set of *virtuous things* is a subset of the set of beautiful things. It should be clear that the set of virtuous things and the set of virtues are not coextensive: Nightingale may be beautiful due to her courage, but she is certainly not one of the virtues.

morally valuable then  $x$  is aesthetically valuable. However, we can see that on the revised articulation this connection is weaker and does not allow for the ethicist conclusion. The revised articulation has it that a morally valuable trait renders the person possessing the trait aesthetically valuable. And this at best implies is that, at least in some cases, for a trait  $x$  to be morally valuable suffices for a person  $y$  to be aesthetically valuable.<sup>4</sup> Morally valuable traits make beautiful people, not beautiful traits. In this way, the moral beauty view does not imply ethicistism, the view that in some cases something has aesthetic value insofar *it* has moral value.

It should be clear, then, that this change in articulation of the moral beauty view has significant broader implications for how we should conceive the scope of the aesthetic and the relation between moral value and aesthetic value. This is why the difference between the two articulations is philosophically substantive and should not be ignored. That said, though ultimately significantly different, the articulations are not incompatible. The revised articulation does not imply that we should stop attributing beauty to the virtues themselves. If one was inclined to attribute beauty to the virtues themselves, then this attitude would neither be mandated nor condemned by the idea that virtues are ways of being beautiful. The revised articulation of the moral beauty view is compatible with the idea that virtues are themselves beautiful (paralleling perhaps how ways of being common are themselves common), just as it is compatible with the idea that virtues are not beautiful (paralleling perhaps how ways of being tall are not themselves tall).

## 6. Conclusion

If people can come to seem more beautiful the better you get to know their personalities, then the moral beauty view can give a perfectly good explanation of this phenomenon. According to the moral beauty view, moral virtues, admirable character traits, or good manners realise moral beauty, because having such morally virtuous traits makes people beautiful. I have argued that the standard articulation of the moral beauty view faces the inheritance problem. If the claim that having a moral virtue makes one beautiful is an implication of the moral beauty view, then the moral beauty view must be articulated in way that is different from how the view is currently presented and defended. I have shown that at least one alternative articulation avoids the problem. I have also shown that the decision how to articulate the moral beauty view has significant broader implications for our understanding of the scope of the aesthetic on the one hand, and on the other hand the relation between moral value and aesthetic value.

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<sup>4</sup> If we only assign moral value to traits qua universals, even this sufficiency claim is not implied by the revised version of the moral beauty view. For, it is possible that courage is morally valuable but there are no courageous people. In that case, that a trait is morally valuable does not imply that anything possesses aesthetic value. If, alternatively, we assign moral value to traits qua tropes (i.e. as possessed by people), then the sufficiency claim is an implication of the view. Personally, I think it makes little sense to attribute moral value to traits regardless of whether they are actually possessed by people.

## References

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