

# Is It Bad to Prefer Attractive Partners?

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## 1 The issue

In a variety of ways, our society favors attractive people and disfavors unattractive people. Social scientists have observed, for instance, that cuter children get more positive attention from their school teachers (Adams & Cohen 1974), that better-looking defendants are treated more leniently by the justice system (Mazzella & Feingold 1994), and that beautiful people are generally perceived as more honest, kind, competent and friendly (Jackson et al. 1995).<sup>1</sup>

These forms of discrimination deserve to be discussed more widely and taken more seriously than they usually are. But treatments of “lookism” by philosophers have condemned most forms of the practice in unambiguous terms (cf. (Chambers forthcoming), (Davis 2007), (Mason 2021), (Minerva 2017). And rightly so: it’s easy to see that cuter kindergartners aren’t entitled to a better educational experience, that ugly convicts don’t deserve harsher punishments, and so on. Treating people differently in these ways for these reasons is bad, just as it would be morally unacceptable to favor white students or wealthy defendants.

There’s another type of lookist discrimination, however, that’s both extremely common and widely condoned by people of all moral persuasions. The attitude I’m talking about is the preference for attractive sexual and romantic partners. Of course, it would be an understatement to say that we merely tolerate this type of discrimination. It’s not only acceptable but thoroughly

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normal, and in fact normative, in the sense that we expect people to prefer attractive partners and deviant preferences are often met with surprise and disapproval. This impression survives empirical scrutiny: as one researcher writes, “abundant evidence has been collected to show that people clearly prefer physically attractive potential partners over less attractive potential partners” (Greitemeyer 2010: 318).

Philosophers have yet to give this phenomenon much thought. This paper sets out to do so, by trying to answer the question posed in the title: Is it morally bad to prefer attractive partners? Or is this a form of discrimination we should accept, and perhaps even promote?

I consider arguments for both views. In broad strokes, I think there’s at least one strong argument that preferring attractive partners is bad. The idea is that choosing partners based on looks seems essentially similar to other objectionable forms of discrimination. In particular, a case can be made that the preference for attractive partners is both unfair and harmful to a significant degree.

In response, one can point to some features of this case that arguably set it apart from racism, sexism and the like. There are interesting issues to think through here, but in the end it’s not clear that any of these responses is entirely successful. So the idea that we should avoid preferring attractive partners is worth taking seriously. (In the end, I’ll suggest that one particular version of the preference is defensible, though only with many cautious provisos.)

Before getting into these arguments, a few things are worth noting. First, “attractive” here will always mean “physically attractive”. Most of us, of course, experience non-physical attraction too—we find people appealing on emotional or intellectual grounds, or on the basis of shared interests or experiences. These other types of attractiveness raise different issues than the physical kind, though, and it’s important not to run them together.

Second and relatedly, it’s clear that few people choose partners exclusively on the basis of physical features. But it’s intelligible to ask whether the preference for attractive partners is bad *to the extent that* it plays a role in our choices, and this is how I understand the question here. As will become clear below, the evidence suggests that attractiveness does in fact figure prominently in people’s partnering decisions, so the moral issue remains significant.

A third clarification. In talking about what we find physically attractive, I don't mean to assume anything controversial about whether our dispositions are biologically programmed, on the one hand, or socially constructed, on the other. (Probably it's some of both, but that's not a claim I'll defend or rely on here.) I also won't be saying much about whether prevailing standards of attractiveness are inherently beneficial or harmful, just or unjust. (I happen to think they're bad in many ways, and philosophers have done important work in explaining how.<sup>2</sup> But this sort of issue isn't my main focus.) What I'd like to do, rather, is try to answer the question: "Is the preference for attractive partners *inherently unjustifiable*, apart from the contingent ways in which mainstream aesthetic standards embody racism, misogyny, ableism, transphobia, and other morally bad attitudes?"

It's important to acknowledge, though, that for whatever reasons—social or biological or both—people largely concur in their judgments about attractiveness. According to a 2000 meta-analysis of facial attractiveness research, "judges (within a given culture) showed high and significant levels of agreement when evaluating the attractiveness of others. ...More importantly, our cross-cultural and cross-ethnic analyses showed that even diverse groups of raters readily agreed about who is and is not attractive. Both our cross-cultural and cross-ethnic agreement effect sizes are more than double the size necessary to be considered large" (Langlois et al. 2000: 399-400). (Often the Pearson's  $r$  coefficient for raters' judgments in these studies is found to be between .85 and .95, where  $r = 1$  indicates perfect correlation. This is indeed a strikingly large effect size.) Of course, not every population is in perfect concordance about every aspect of attractiveness. Some studies have found small but significant racial differences in body type preferences, for example (Greenberg & LaPorte 1996), as well as cultural effects on certain aspects of facial attractiveness judgments (Little et al. 2007). On the whole, though, people tend to agree much more strongly and extensively than they disagree. So when I talk about attractiveness below without reference to any particular person's judgments, I typically mean

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<sup>2</sup> See (Irvin 2016) for essays on body aesthetics, many of which deal with the ethical, social and political dimensions of the subject.

“attractiveness as per the social consensus” (or, where appropriate, “attractiveness as per the raters in the relevant study”).

One last remark. Although this paper’s main question is philosophical, much of the research I discuss below is from psychology, sociology and related fields. This is partly because few philosophers have addressed the topic. On the other hand, the scientific literature on attractiveness judgments, their sources, and their effects on people’s social and mental lives is quite large. That’s fortunate, since a responsible philosophical treatment of these issues needs to look carefully at the evidence rather than relying solely on impressions and intuitions.

## **2 Why favoring attractive partners seems bad**

### **2.1 The argument sketched**

I’ll start by giving a brief argument to the effect that preferring attractive partners is bad. The idea, as mentioned above, is that discriminating in favor of attractive partners seems relevantly like other morally objectionable forms of discrimination. So if you’re opposed to sexism and racism in hiring, say, then you should also be opposed to the attractiveness preference. Or so the argument goes.

I don’t expect to be able to develop this analogy in a way that will satisfy everyone. To do so would require settling many difficult theoretical questions—for instance, about the natures of harm, fairness, wrongful discrimination, and the relationships between these things. This paper’s aims are more modest. I’ll try to show that, on a range of reasonable views about the relevant ethical questions, the preference for attractive partners plausibly counts as bad.

The word ‘bad’ will itself function as a hedge term here. I leave open the precise sense in which this and other forms of discrimination may be morally objectionable (for instance, whether they’re impermissible or merely suberogatory). These evasions serve partly to avoid complexities which I lack the space to address. They’re also warranted because my argument highlights two distinct sources of plausible badness—one broadly deontological, one broadly consequentialist—

and I prefer to let the reader calculate the resultant of these vectors within her preferred moral framework.

The two sources of badness in question are *unfairness* and *harm*. An *unfair* behavior, as I'll use the term, is one that treats possession of some trait as a basis for awarding or denying a benefit, even though the extent to which someone possesses that trait is unrelated to the extent to which they deserve the benefit.<sup>3</sup> Unfairness is bad for broadly deontological reasons: it can be seen as a type of injustice, a failure to distribute benefits to their appropriate recipients. (Note however that unfairness need not involve a violation of *rights*—more on this below.)

A *harmful* behavior is roughly one that makes some person or group worse off.<sup>4</sup> Worse off in what ways, and relative to what? These are difficult questions for harm theorists in general, but our specific interest is in the harms of discrimination. If a form of discrimination favors group *X* and disfavors group *Y*, I'll count it as harmful if it causes the members of *Y* to do significantly worse than the members of *X* along intuitively important dimensions of human wellbeing (without any compensating benefit). This sort of harm is bad for broadly consequentialist reasons: it involves a net loss to happiness or flourishing compared to a possible discrimination-free state.

A third factor that's sometimes been thought to matter is whether or not possession of the relevant trait is voluntarily controllable. The idea is that it's worse to discriminate against people who have no choice about belonging to the targeted group. In fact, though, control seems to make at most a small moral difference. There are cases of permissible discrimination involving non-controllable traits (e.g., basketball teams' preference for tall players), and cases of impermissible discrimination involving controllable traits (e.g., religious discrimination, even when the persecuted group's members are free to convert to other faiths).

Further candidates have been proposed for what makes discrimination wrong, such as its demeaning character (Hellman 2008) or its connection to prejudicial attitudes (Ely 1980). I'm

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<sup>3</sup> Much has been written about desert and its role in moral theory. (Feinberg 1970) is a classic discussion of desert and justice. (Arneson 2007) deals with desert and equality.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on harm is also large. (Purves 2019) defends a worse-off-making theory. (Arneson 2018) discusses harm and wrongful discrimination.

doubtful that these are necessary features of morally bad discrimination, but the general problem needn't be solved here. All I want to do is establish a sufficient condition. My claim is that if a kind of discrimination is both unfair and harmful to a significant degree—and, perhaps, if it's based on a feature that isn't readily controllable—then that kind of discrimination is bad. This seems hard to deny. Indeed, many forms of racism and sexism meet each of these criteria, which seems to go some distance toward explaining their undeniable wrongness.<sup>5</sup>

Crucially, though, the same can apparently be said about the preference for attractive partners. Let me take the previous points in reverse order.

## **2.2 Control**

First, for what it's worth, our physical attractiveness is largely not under our voluntary control. We can dress to advantage, get in better shape, improve our grooming habits, and so on. But these kinds of efforts only go so far. Many people would remain decidedly unattractive even if they exerted all their energies in this direction. (Consider that factors like age, skin condition and facial structure play a large role in determining attractiveness, all of which are hard or impossible to change. Indeed, (Currie & Little 2009) finds that facial beauty is the most important component of overall attractiveness.) What's more, the kinds of interventions that are under our control require resources to which many people lack access—free time to exercise regularly, access to healthy food, knowledge of fashion, proficiency with cosmetics, and the money to obtain all these things. So becoming much better looking isn't a live option for most people.

## **2.3 Harm**

Second is the question of harm. Do less attractive people suffer significant consequences from being disfavored as partners? This is an important juncture in the argument, so it's important to look closely at the evidence.

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<sup>5</sup> For a theory of wrongful discrimination that incorporates elements of both harm and desert, see (Lippert-Rasmussen 2014).

In fact, research in social psychology consistently finds that less attractive people have reduced access to satisfying romantic and sexual experiences, and they're consequently more lonely and less happy with these aspects of their lives. I take these outcomes to represent losses along important dimensions of wellbeing.

A few noteworthy findings are as follows. Unattractiveness is correlated with loneliness, social anxiety, self-consciousness, stress and life dissatisfaction (Feingold 1992), (Zakahi & Duran 1998), (Umberson & Hughes 1987). Attractive people are more liked by their peers as children (Barrow et al. 2011), and attractive heterosexual people have more opposite-sex friends (White 1980) and more enjoyable opposite-sex social interactions (Reis et al. 1982). Perhaps as a result, better-looking people have more sexual partners—more short-term partners for men, and more long-term partners for women (Rhodes et al. 2005)—and are more likely to get married and have more children (Jokela 2009). This pattern is consistent with the well-confirmed finding that physical attractiveness is a highly prized quality in a mate, according to both professed preferences (Buss & Barnes 1986), (Shackelford et al. 2005) and actual choices (Asendorpf et al. 2011), (Luo & Zhang 2009).

Unsurprisingly in light of these trends, less attractive heterosexual people rate more highly in “heterosocial anxiety”, a construct reflecting both uneasiness in interactions with potential partners and unhappiness with one's love life (Curran & Lippold 1975), (Firth 1986), (Herold 1979), (Leck 2006). One might think that unattractive people with long-term partners are immune to the effects of the beauty preference. But this doesn't seem true in general—men with less attractive wives are less satisfied with their marriages, for instance, presumably to their spouses' detriment (Meltzer et al. 2014). It's worth emphasizing that the attractiveness ratings in the above studies are made by neutral third parties, ruling out simple explanations in terms of self-fulfilling prophecies or observer bias.

Of course, it's important to consider effect size alongside statistical significance. Even if physical attractiveness is correlated with relationship prospects in the above ways, the connection might be too weak to merit concern. But that appears not to be the case. For instance, the meta-analysis (Feingold 1992) finds effect sizes of attractiveness of about  $r = .30$  and  $r = .20$ ,

respectively, on popularity with the opposite sex and freedom from heterosocial anxiety (324). (A correlation of  $r = .30$  is generally considered a medium-sized effect. For instance, gender and weight in U.S. adults are correlated with  $r = .26$  (Meyer et al. 2001: 131).) So the tendency of better-looking people to have greater partnering success and satisfaction is comparable in magnitude to the tendency of men to weigh more than women—by no means a negligible effect.

According to one group of researchers, studies like these “suggest that many long-held beliefs about relationships, such as an emphasis on personality or values, are little more than folklore. Of course, individuals seek out a potential mate possessing positive personality traits, as long as those traits are bundled in an attractive package. Although some may dismiss the influence of physical attractiveness as a minor aspect of one’s life, these data clearly indicate that it plays a key role in determining one’s ability to mate” (Westfall et al. 2019: 539). If this way of putting things involves a touch of hyperbole, it also contains a substantial kernel of truth.

People with whom I’ve discussed these ideas have sometimes expressed skepticism about the harm issue. One common line of thought goes like this: “Perhaps it’s true that the average highly attractive person has, say, ten satisfactory potential partners to choose from, while the average less attractive person only has three. But it doesn’t follow that the unattractive person is worse off. After all, what matters (to most people) is just having at least one satisfactory partner. As long as everyone can pair up with someone they like, as is usually the case, there’s no significant harm in getting fewer choices.”

I think studies like the above show that this is an inaccurate model of partnering. In reality, it’s not just that less attractive people have fewer options; rather, they have a harder time finding partners at all, and their interactions with potential partners are typically rarer and less pleasant. What’s more, the attractiveness preference may even affect the quality of long-term relationships. I conclude that discrimination in favor of attractive partners is harmful to a degree worth taking seriously.

Even if this conclusion is correct, one might wonder about the net benefits of an alternative regime in which less attractive people are more widely chosen as partners. Suppose that, as things now stand, *A* and *B* are acquaintances with compatible personalities, interests and values.

While both are on the partnership market, *A* isn't particularly attracted to *B* and has avoided getting involved with them on this account. After thinking things over, however, *A* decides they should be more open-minded and give things with *B* a chance.

Is this likely to be a better state of affairs, overall, than the status quo? One might worry that it's not. After all, *A* will plausibly be less happy, because they're now burdened with a partner to whom they don't feel genuinely attracted. Moreover, when *B* comes to realize this, they'll surely resent *A* for it—no self-respecting person wants a relationship based on someone's feelings of pity or duty. It seems that *A*'s well-meaning effort is bound to fail, and hence that there's nothing to be gained by getting involved with people to whom one isn't attracted.

I don't think this objection succeeds. It goes wrong because it misconstrues both parties' situations in important ways. First, as far as *A* is concerned, the objection underestimates the malleability of our tastes and preferences. It's far from inevitable that someone in *A*'s position would remain unattracted to *B* or would regret choosing *B* as a partner. (For more on this point, see §3.1 below.) Even if we set this fact aside, the objection mischaracterizes *B*'s position. If *B* is at all perceptive and mature, they'll be aware of their unexceptional looks. Thus they won't have pinned their relationship hopes on finding someone who, against all odds, considers them a great beauty. Rather, they'll be looking for a partner who values them for their other (and in any case more important) qualities: for their sense of humor, social activism, sexual prowess, impressive collection of classic soul records, or whatever. By hypothesis, *A* and *B* are in a position to appreciate each other in these ways. It's doubtful, and presumptuous to claim, that *B* would prefer continued loneliness to a relationship with someone like *A*. So the worry isn't convincing. There's no reason to think that things wouldn't be generally better if less attractive people had more partnering opportunities.

## **2.4 Unfairness**

Finally, is a preference for attractive partners *unfair* in the above sense? That is, are attractive people inherently more deserving of romantic and sexual partnership than unattractive people?

That depends on what makes someone deserving of partnership.<sup>6</sup> Before saying more on this issue, I need to clarify the notion of partnership I have in mind.

People make partners of one another in many ways, for all sorts of reasons. Some relationships' primary *raison d'être* involve appeasing families, gaining access to resources, strengthening political alliances, improving a partner's social status, getting over an ex, one-upping a rival, or securing a target for a partner's abusive impulses. The natures and goals of the various possible types of partnership are so different that it's obviously hopeless to look for a single, consistent and all-encompassing notion of "deserving partner".

Fortunately, it's not my goal to find such a thing. The notion of partnership that's relevant here is relatively narrow: enough so, I think, that talk about desert stands some chance of making sense. What I have in mind are the kinds of sexual and romantic relationships typically sought in societies like ours. Such relationships aim at (some subset of) the enjoyment of shared activities, romantic passion, sexual satisfaction, friendship, companionship, sharing of material and financial resources, practical and emotional support, mutual esteem, understanding and concern, reproduction, child-raising, and family integration, perhaps among other things. (Obviously some of these items pertain more strongly to certain kinds of relationships than to others.) I'm not claiming that partnerships aimed at these ends are objectively the best ones. But I think something like these desiderata are what most people want and expect out of prospective partners in modern liberal societies. So it's appropriate to focus on such relationships in considering whether or not attractive people are more deserving partners.

What, then, makes someone deserving of partnership in this sense? I think there are at least two defensible views to take here. One possibility is that partnership is a good that everyone deserves, at least insofar as they're able to participate in it and enjoy it. Just as people don't have to do anything special to deserve a satisfying life free from inordinate pain, one might think, neither can they somehow earn or merit partner intimacy and sexual fulfillment. On this view, the notion of "more deserving partner" makes no more sense than that of "more deserving

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<sup>6</sup> As an anonymous referee suggests, there may be ways to justify the unfairness claim without appealing to the notion of desert—for instance, one could talk instead about the duty to take others' interests appropriately into account. Unfortunately, I lack space to consider the merits of such alternatives.

property owner” or “more deserving recipient of disaster relief”; one is fully deserving just by virtue of being a person with the relevant capabilities and needs.

Note that whether everyone *deserves* partnership or sex is an importantly different question from whether there exists a *right* to either. You might deserve a job in your field on account of your skills and experience, for example, or a generous bequest in your grandmother’s will thanks to the exemplary kindness you showed her. Nevertheless, your failing to get these things need not constitute rights violations. Suppose that Grandma instead favored your charming miscreant cousin in a moment of weakness. Even if she chose poorly and ought to have done otherwise, you haven’t been denied something to which you were entitled, and you have no actionable moral claim against Grandma. You deserve the inheritance most, it’s true, but Grandma’s right to dispose of her property as she pleases is decisive.

The same goes for the suggestion about partnership. The idea that everyone deserves a partner is distinct from, and weaker than, the idea that everyone has a right to a partner. In particular, the former doesn’t entail that unpartnered people have been denied something owed them, or that they have a moral claim (against anyone in particular, or against society at large). This point is worth emphasizing because some philosophers have forcefully rejected the idea of a “right to sex”, partly in reaction to recent acts of misogynist violence by sexually disaffected men (Srinivasan 2021).<sup>7</sup> I want to be clear that the desert claim being considered here isn’t tantamount to the assertion of such a right.

Even with this last clarification, some might favor a less ecumenical stance on the desert issue. On this latter conception, partnership isn’t fully and equally deserved by everyone; rather, a person is deserving only to the extent that they’d make a *good* partner. Being a good partner, in turn, means being apt to achieve the kinds of ends mentioned above. This will require various social, moral, emotional, sexual and practical competencies, exactly which ones depending on the type of relationship and the preferences of the people involved. But it’s hard to see how

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<sup>7</sup> There’s much related to this paper’s topic in Srinivasan’s important book, which looks carefully at the politics and ethics of partner choice. See especially “The Right to Sex” and “Coda: The Politics of Desire”.

physical attractiveness might be relevant. A person's looks don't imply anything about their qualifications as a friend, parent, confidant, supporter, sharer of resources or the like.

One might suspect that attractiveness *is* relevant to sexual satisfaction, in the sense that people with better-looking partners have more enjoyable sex lives. Is this actually true? As far as I can tell, very little research has addressed this question directly. But I'm aware of no evidence for an affirmative answer and a small amount of evidence for a negative answer. In fact, the single study I know of that deals directly with this issue found that "attractive women with unattractive partners experienced greater sexual satisfaction than attractive women with attractive partners" (Murstein et al. 2002: 312). (There was no significant relationship between partner attractiveness and sexual satisfaction for men.) This doesn't seem implausible. Being good in bed presumably has more to do with things like attentiveness, communication, openness, variety and feelings of trust and connection.

It is true, as noted above, that *being attractive* oneself is correlated with having *more* sex. But this is obviously a different question than the one we're considering here. It would be nice to have more data pertaining to this latter question, but given what we know and what seems likely, there's no reason to think that attractive people make superior sexual partners. So attractiveness probably isn't relevant to one's overall goodness as a partner in any significant way.

Before moving on, let me consider a final possible view. This is the idea that the notion of desert simply doesn't apply to partner choice: there's no interesting sense in which anyone can be said to deserve or not deserve partnership. On this picture, choosing a partner is more or less morally equivalent to choosing an outfit. If I decide to wear the green shirt rather than the yellow one, that's just because it happens to strike my fancy, and there's no deeper justification to give; it would be confused to ask whether the green shirt *deserves* to be worn, or whether it's more worthy than the other items in my wardrobe. Likewise, selecting a partner is (and can only be) an amoral choice based on arbitrary personal preferences.

If this view were right, the claim that it's unfair to favor attractive partners would stand refuted. Indeed, the notion of fairness wouldn't apply to partner choice at all, so no criticism of this kind could succeed against any set of preferences. But I think the view is implausible. Some

criteria for choosing partners are obviously unfair. Consider a white supremacist obsessed with racial purity who deplors miscegenation, or a man who only pursues virgins because he views other women as morally contaminated. Such people are choosing badly, and their preferences deserve to be criticized. So we should reject the claim that considerations of desert don't apply to partner choice.<sup>8</sup>

This concludes the “fairness” part of the argument. To summarize, the reasoning was as follows. Either partnership is a good that everyone deserves equally, or else a person deserves partnership to the extent that they'd make a satisfactory partner. In the former case, attractiveness is clearly neither here nor there. In the latter case—given the predominant understanding of the nature and goals of partnership in societies like ours—attractiveness also turns out to be irrelevant to desert. So on any reasonable view, being more or less attractive doesn't make someone more or less deserving of partnership.

Given this last claim, it follows that discrimination in favor of attractive potential partners is unfair. I previously argued that it's also harmful (and based on a largely non-controllable feature). At least for those theorists who hold desert-based or harm-based conceptions of wrongful discrimination, these conclusions suggest that the preference for attractive partners is morally unjustifiable.

### **3 Three replies**

Of course, interesting philosophical questions are rarely so easy to settle. There are a number of ways to try to defend the preference for attractive partners. In this section, I'll present and discuss three such arguments. The first has to do with the possibility of controlling our partner preferences. The second pertains to attractiveness and “good genes”. The last (and, I think, most successful) links certain aspects of attractiveness to a prospective partner's personality and values.

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<sup>8</sup> See (Lazenby & Butterfield 2018) for further discussion of the possibility of wrongfully discriminatory partner choice based on factors like race.

### 3.1 Attractiveness and choice

The first reply I'll consider involves the idea that we can't control our preference for attractive partners: instead, we just find ourselves preferring whomever we prefer, and there's nothing much we can do about it, even if we happen to want to. This idea is in line with a popular picture of attraction as a mysterious, irrational force that often overrides our explicit beliefs and desires. If one also accepts a suitable "ought implies can"-style principle, it follows that the preference for attractive partners isn't blameworthy: we can't have chosen wrongly because we couldn't have chosen otherwise.

This line of thought sounds plausible at first, but I don't think it holds up to scrutiny. In order to see why not, it's useful to distinguish between preferences and wants. Say that a *want* is something you desire, or that you're disposed to desire under normal circumstances. A *preference*, by contrast, is what you choose (or what you're disposed to choose) after your wants and other relevant considerations are taken into account. My first claim is that we aren't entirely helpless with respect to our partner wants. My second claim is that, even if it were true that we can't control our wants, this wouldn't mean that we can't control our preferences.

Start with the first claim. As I think everyone can agree, our wants for many things tend to shift over time, as we accumulate experiences and adjust our beliefs and values. Sometimes these changes are guided by deliberate decisions. Suppose you dislike olives, for instance, but you recognize their culinary value and aspire to enjoy them more. After a period of regular exposure—starting with small tastes, if necessary, in conjunction with foods you already like—dislike will give way to tolerance, and in time, perhaps, to genuine appreciation. (Actually, this isn't a made-up story; a friend of mine cultivated a taste for olives in just this way.)

I suspect that most of us can, and at least occasionally do, make the same kinds of choices about our partnering preferences. And we often have the same kinds of reasons. Just as my friend's distaste for olives unduly restricted the range of foods he could enjoy, our physical tastes can keep us from taking pleasure in a wider range of people and relationships.

We can learn to like to a new food by eating it more often, but how exactly do we retrain our judgments about attractiveness? The aesthetics literature has some useful suggestions. (Eaton 2016), for example, argues that we should modify our taste in bodies in order to combat fat oppression. Taking her cue from Aristotle, Eaton recommends exposing ourselves to “vivid and engaging representations”—including artworks, advertisements, and products of popular culture—that “aestheticize fat bodies” (39). (Irvin 2017) is also concerned with the role of attractiveness judgments in maintaining oppressive social relations. Irvin describes a practice she calls “aesthetic exploration”, a mode of attention which can plausibly help expand our aesthetic horizons. As Irvin writes:

Our approach is to direct an exploratory gaze at the body and seek out aspects of it that are unique, experiences it affords that we have never had before. We aim to take pleasure in these encounters. On encountering a body with interest and openness, with a willingness to see it in ways that we have never seen it before, we can have an aesthetic experience of it that need not involve assessing it or issuing a verdict about [it]... We can simply immerse ourselves in the experience for its own sake. (12)

I think these are both promising ways to broaden the spectrum of traits we find physically appealing (or at least agreeable). Of course, even after using all the tools at our disposal, there might be limits to what we can train ourselves to want—I might never come to like pickled herring, or extreme body piercings, however much I try. But it’s enough for my purposes if we can exercise some significant degree of control over our tastes.

Even if I’m wrong about our wants, though, it doesn’t follow that we can’t control our partner *preferences*. To see why, consider again the analogous case of food. Human beings have evolved to find sugary and fatty foods tasty. So, for most of us, things like ice cream, donuts and deep-dish pizza count as wants—we enjoy them a great deal and hence we’re strongly motivated to eat them. Nevertheless, many people prefer not to have these kinds of foods very often. This isn’t because their wants are any less powerful, or any less biologically hardwired. Rather, it’s

because they take themselves to have good reasons to choose differently—practical reasons having to do with health, or moral reasons having to do with animal suffering, say. So even if we can't change our desire for fat and sugar, we can very well be motivated to prefer other foods, and we can be happy about our ability to make this choice.

It seems to me that choosing partners presents much the same picture. Suppose it's true that, for one reason or another, we can't help but feel a strong desire to date or have sex with good-looking people. Does it follow that we're bound to prefer such partners? No, because we might well have countervailing practical or moral reasons not to choose the things we're inclined to want. (The belief that a preference for attractive partners is inappropriately discriminatory could be one such reason.)

So I don't think this first argument is successful. If preferring attractive partners is morally defensible, it's not because we're incapable of preferring otherwise.

### **3.2 Facial attractiveness and “good genes”**

The next argument I want to consider has to do with attractiveness and Darwinian fitness. It's often speculated that humans (among other animals) are disposed to prefer facially attractive mates because good looks indicate lower loads of disease and mutation, and hence greater fitness and “better genes”. Partners with these qualities are people with whom we can expect to have a larger number of more fit offspring. And this is arguably a goal we're morally entitled to pursue; surely it's permissible to do what we can to ensure that our future children are healthy and successful.

This line of argument need not presuppose, implausibly, that people are generally *aware of* and *consciously motivated by* fitness considerations. (Some are, but more probably aren't.) Rather, the claim is that the pursuit of genetic advantage is in fact the biological reason for our partner preferences (whether we know this or not), and that the preferences are justified because this pursuit is morally worthwhile.

Even if this idea is right, it has an obvious limitation: it only applies to partners with whom we expect to reproduce. But most of the partners the average person has in their lifetime don't fit this

description. So the proposal does nothing to explain or justify our preference for attractive partners in casual short-term relationships, one-night hookups, non-procreative long-term partnerships, and so on. This is especially problematic since people often care *most* about physical attractiveness in the context of casual dating and temporary sexual relationships. The proposal also fails to explain the preferences of many people who aren't cisgender and heterosexual. For instance, cisgender gay partners care about looks as much as anyone, but presumably not for genetic reasons—even if they have children by way of surrogacy or artificial insemination, only one parent makes a genetic contribution, and hence only one partner has a Darwinian motive for valuing the other's attractiveness. All of this suggests that we don't, in fact, generally prefer good-looking partners on account of the genes they'll impart to our future children.

At any rate, it's far from clear that attractiveness is actually a good indicator of genetic fitness, as this argument assumes. A growing body of empirical work raises doubts about any such relationship. For instance, a large recent British study failed to find any correlation between childhood health and facial symmetry (Pound et al. 2014). (Lee et al. 2016) obtained similarly negative results about facial averageness and paternal age at conception, a reliable proxy for mutation load. (Symmetry and averageness are important determinants of facial beauty.) And (Mitchem et al. 2015) challenges longstanding conventional wisdom by finding no relationship between attractiveness and intelligence.

What are we to make of our preference for attractive faces if the Darwinian explanation is wrong? As it turns out, there's an alternative story preferred by many scientists. According to this rival view, symmetrical and average-looking faces are appealing because they closely resemble facial prototypes—that is, mental “reference faces” used by the brain to classify stimuli as facelike or non-facelike—and hence they're easier for our visual systems to process. In turn, it's generally true that stimuli which are easy to process tend to be more pleasant to look at. If this theory is right, then, facial attractiveness is a matter of processing fluency rather than fitness signaling. (See (Trujillo et al. 2014) for a discussion of this view and some of the evidence in its favor.)

I don't mean to imply that any of these issues are settled. Basic research on attractiveness is still ongoing, and some studies have found evidence consistent with the Darwinian view. Still, it's important that the connection between good looks and fitness is apparently neither large nor straightforward. Even if there's some correlation, it's almost certainly not enough to justify the strong general preference for attractive partners, especially since most partnerships aren't aimed at reproduction in the first place.

Finally, it's worth noting that the Darwinian defense depends on the assumption that healthy and fit children—or children deemed healthy and fit by the prevailing norms—are better off than children with (traits construed as) illnesses or disabilities. But this assumption is questionable. Disability theorists have argued that such conditions aren't in general bad for the people who have them (Campbell & Stramondo 2017), and that there's no compelling altruistic reason for parents to avoid having disabled children (Barker & Wilson 2019). If this goes for major medicalized conditions that have significant effects on children's lives, then it goes even more for whatever small margin of perceived optimality is lost by settling for a slightly less elite set of genes.

### **3.3 Style and personality**

There's one more argument to consider, and I think it fares better than its predecessors. Although it doesn't amount to anything like a general vindication, it plausibly explains why one particular type of attractiveness preference might be justified.

In contrast to the first two arguments, this line of thought focuses on specific, and generally non-facial, aspects of physical attractiveness. Some examples of the features I have in mind include a person's way of dressing and grooming, their physical comportment (including things like posture, gait and manner of speaking), and some aspects of body type. I'll refer to such qualities as elements of *personal style*.

Aspects of style clearly contribute to a person's overall physical attractiveness. And these qualities seem important, at least in part, because they often tell us something about people's personalities, values, habits and interests. We can reasonably infer, for instance, that a sharp

dresser is conscientious and has a certain aesthetic sensibility. A lean and muscular body reflects a likely interest in sports. People with pink hair tend not to be socially conservative, and so on. At least some of these traits are appropriate grounds for favoring or disfavoring potential partners. What makes someone a better or worse partner for us, after all, is primarily what sort of person they are and whether their traits are compatible with ours.

Physical attraction often seems to work like this. When we're drawn to people's looks, our feelings of interest and pleasure needn't take the form of a simple, uninformative reward signal. Rather, attraction is frequently based on the desirable qualities we take people to have, as revealed by their appearances. Suppose you're attracted to Tyler's colorful tattoos and statement-making glasses, say. Probably this isn't just in virtue of their intrinsic aesthetic qualities, but at least in part because of the confident edginess they convey. Your physical attraction is thus mediated (or perhaps even constituted) by your impression that Tyler is the sort of person you find interesting and appealing.

So the argument, in short, is this. It's permissible to prefer physically attractive partners insofar as their attractiveness consists in certain aspects of personal style. That's because these style qualities function as a signal for other things, like personality and values, that can play a legitimate role in partner choice.

There's much to say about this line of thought. In the remainder of the section I'll try to answer two important questions: First, why should we think that attractive style qualities are good indicators of other desirable traits? Second, what are the risks and limitations of choosing partners based on aspects of style?<sup>9</sup>

As for the first question, the available evidence suggests that some personality traits and other qualities are reliably correlated with style. For instance, (Albright et al. 1988) and (Borkenau & Liebler 1992) showed that a person's level of conscientiousness can be predicted from the way they dress. More recently, (Naumann et al. 2009) found that people can gauge the presence or absence of a variety of traits—notably openness, likability, self-esteem, loneliness and

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<sup>9</sup> For related discussion of the relationship between appearance and personal qualities in the context of lookist discrimination, see (Liu 2018).

religiosity—with decent accuracy from full-body photographs of strangers. The cues used to form these impressions included the stylishness, distinctiveness and neatness of the target subjects, as well as their postures and facial expressions. (Carney et al. 2007) studied personality inferences based on very short video clips, finding that “judgments for extraversion exhibited the greatest accuracy, followed by negative affect, conscientiousness, IQ, neuroticism, positive affect, openness, and agreeableness” (1069) (with all judgments significantly more accurate than chance).

It’s worth noting that it’s actually *useful* to use style qualities as a guide to other traits, in the sense that it would often be hard to get the same information by other means. Without any physical clues to rely on, how would you go about determining that someone is messy, or that they lead a sedentary life, or that they reject traditional gender roles? Unlike, say, intelligence or extraversion, these aren’t the sorts of traits that we can generally gauge from a polite long-distance conversation with a stranger. So inferences from specific aspects of style to personality are often practically indispensable.

This optimistic picture comes with major caveats, however. There are at least four important ways in which style qualities can fail to function as useful or appropriate guides to a potential partner’s underlying qualities.

One difficulty is distinguishing real correlations from illusory ones. We’re constantly confronted with stereotypes that purport to tell us something about people who look, dress or act a certain way—blondes, people with glasses or tattoos, people who smile often, men with beards, women who wear makeup, and so on. Some of these generalizations may be fairly reliable, but many others are the products of prejudice or wishful thinking. For example, it’s widely believed that shifty eye movement and avoidance of eye contact are signs of dishonesty, but these traits are almost certainly unrelated (DePaulo et al. 2003). Basing our partner preferences on inaccurate generalizations is bad for obvious reasons.

Second, while some correlations between style and personality are reliable to a certain degree, they’re also capable of breaking down badly in ways we should be worried about. Hence it would be inappropriate to presume that a fat person is unathletic, or that a woman in a hijab is a

conservative traditionalist—although such associations may not be statistically baseless, they also play into demeaning and unreliable stereotypes that masquerade dangerously as universal truths. (For insightful discussion of the possible wrongs of accurate prejudicial beliefs, see (Basu 2019).)

Finally, whenever some trait  $S$  is used as a proxy to infer the presence of another trait  $T$ , there's an incentive to game the system by manipulating  $S$  to send one's desired signal about  $T$ . This phenomenon is known as Goodhart's law (after the economist Charles Goodhart) or Campbell's law (after the social scientist Donald Campbell). The idea is that “when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure” (Strathern 1997: 308), because it comes to reflect people's self-conscious efforts to optimize the target variable rather than the true underlying state of the system of interest.

Goodhart-type problems are a perennial feature of partner choice scenarios, insofar as people generally try to make good initial impressions in ways that don't always faithfully indicate their actual traits. Some of these behaviors are expected and hence fairly benign. It's understood that many people will dress better, make more interesting conversation and be more attentive to a prospective partner on a first date, gradually regressing to a less dazzling mean as the relationship goes on.

But it's likely that the widespread transition to online dating has made Goodhart problems considerably worse. In online settings, initial partnering choices are made on the basis of short profiles dominated by photos. Since users control exactly what potential partners see, meticulously crafting a maximally appealing profile is both possible and strongly incentivized. So it's no surprise that the internet teems with advice about strategically choosing photos to fine-tune the signals one sends. These sources are sometimes very clear about their outlook:

To get on the good side of her first impression, your profile photos need to convey all the reasons you're such a great catch. This is called “signalling,” and it can make or break your online dating photos. Think of it this way—she's going to imagine herself in the lifestyle the profile pic conveys. It's why unique travel photos are so successful. You're visually communicating that you're interesting, you'll take her to exotic places, and most importantly, that you have the financial means to do it. (Vida Select n.d.)

The goal here is obviously not to convey one's personality, values and interests as honestly as possible, but rather to build one's self-presentation around signifiers that indicate desirable qualities (with the subtext being that it's wise to do this whether or not one actually possesses those qualities).

All in all, then, the current proposal hangs in a precarious balance. As long as attractive style qualities are good indicators of desirable personality traits, as long as those personality traits are genuinely relevant to someone's quality as a partner, as long as our judgments aren't being guided by invidious stereotypes, *and* as long as no deception or manipulation is involved, it's plausibly permissible to choose partners based on the attractiveness of their personal styles. But it's easy to go wrong here, and we're very often not in a position to know whether we're in a good epistemic situation or a bad one.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The widespread tendency to favor attractive partners is more morally problematic than most philosophers have realized. If the arguments I've given here are on the right track, for instance, it's hard to see how a preference for attractive *faces* can be justified at all. (This is particularly concerning, since facial beauty seems to be the most important determinant of overall physical attractiveness; cf. (Currie & Little 2009).) And other kinds of physical preferences seem permissible only under conditions that are arguably rare in practice. Many of our ordinary romantic and sexual practices, then, likely involve a sort of wrongful discrimination that's not so different from racism or sexism.

As seriously as I think we should take the conclusions defended here, it's important not to confuse them with other, stronger claims. It's no part of my view, for instance, that it's bad to *have* an attractive partner. On the contrary, there's nothing obviously wrong with choosing to

date, marry or sleep with someone good-looking if they're the best person for the job— attractiveness might not be a good reason to favor someone, but it's no reason to do the opposite either. This paper isn't a call to engage in "reverse discrimination".

I'm also not defending the puritanical view that it's wrong to appreciate human beauty, including the beauty of a potential or actual partner. After all, it's entirely possible to enjoy and admire something without taking these feelings as grounds to do anything in particular. I enjoy looking at wildflowers, but this doesn't incline me to despoil the landscape by picking them all and carrying them home. (And even if it did, the blame would lie with the way I've chosen to respond to my pleasure, not with the pleasure itself.) Similarly, there's no need to suppress or apologize for one's enjoyment of beautiful people. What's problematic isn't the appreciation of good looks, but rather a certain sort of possible reaction to it.

An important issue about which I've said very little is how best to respond to the problem on various levels: individually, socially, institutionally and so on. I regret that space constraints prevent me from addressing these questions here. I leave them for future work—with luck, others' as well as my own.

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