ARTICLE

WILEY

Personal Beauty and Personal Agency

Madeline Martin-Seaver

University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, USA

Correspondence
Madeline Martin-Seaver.
Email: martinseaverm@usf.edu

Abstract

We make choices about our own appearance and evaluate others' choices – every day. These choices are meaningful for us as individuals and as members of communities. But many features of personal appearance are due to luck, and many cultural beauty standards make some groups and individuals worse off (this is called "lookism"). So, how are we to square these two facets of personal appearance? And how are we to evaluate agency in the context of personal beauty? I identify three ways of responding to these questions: beauty advocacy, beauty skepticism, and beauty revisionism. Advocates connect an honorific sense of beauty with personal character. Skeptics focus on beauty standards, and primarily offer a social critique of beauty standards. Some skeptics suggest embracing other aesthetic ideals – even ugliness. Revisionists critique beauty standards, but retain an honorific sense of beauty. Each position offers tools to evaluate personal agency as aesthetic agency, whether first-personally or through our appreciation of others' appearance.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Personal agency and beauty share a complex relationship. Though beauty is partly a matter of luck, choices about personal appearance reflect values, situations, and taste. A woman who joined my graduate program a few years behind me told me she felt more comfortable in the program when she saw me wear red lipstick to class. Red lipstick isn't usually a signal to women they are welcome in a philosophy program, but its wider cultural significance helps it communicate such a message. However, the relationship between beauty and agency may be fraught. A transman who experiences vocal dysphoria because he cannot hear his voice in a "masculine" register might feel that vocal beauty is out of reach and, simultaneously, that gendered norms for vocal beauty are oppressive. He finds himself in a bind, trying to navigate beauty, beauty standards, and the pressure to conform to beauty standards. In both examples, personal agency is clearly relevant, since we choose whether and what lipstick to wear and our trans friend

may decide to pursue vocal masculinization therapy or opt out of it. But we need more information to parse beauty's relevance and evaluate the people involved.

For some philosophers, being beautiful does not result from brute appearance, but from self-cultivation, which may also include developing appreciative habits for other bodies. So personal agency and personal beauty converge in choices about appearance, self-cultivation, and appreciative habits. I identify three positions to take with respect to beauty's merits: advocacy, skepticism, and revisionism. I first discuss advocates, then skeptics, then revisionists, and conclude by highlighting common themes and pointing out some remaining questions. Surveying the positions in this order reveals not only disagreements about the relationship between personal beauty and personal agency, but different ways of construing beauty and its social significance.

By beginning with advocates, we start with an honorific and (generally) universal conception of beauty as aesthetic excellence. This understanding motivates a positive connection between personal beauty and personal agency. Advocates generally see beauty as an ethico-aesthetic phenomenon, where beauty reflects character. This means personal beauty is not directly agential, but results from other ways of exercising agency. Importantly, agency not only *makes* one beautiful but makes one able to *see* beauty.

In arguing that beauty is harmful to agency, skeptics reject several advocacy positions. I subdivide skeptics into social skeptics and aesthetic skeptics. Social skeptics focus on beauty standards – they treat beauty ethically more than aesthetically. They reject the universality of beauty and sometimes the honorific aspect of it. Social skeptics direct our attention to practices. Aesthetic skeptics critique beauty, more than beauty standards, and may privilege alternative aesthetic ideals. Aesthetic skeptics may reject both the universal and honorific sense of beauty, though they may also accept both and instead treat beauty as morally perverse.

Revisionists often share aesthetic skeptics' interest in alternative aesthetic ideals, and social skeptics' critiques of beauty standards' iniquitous effects, but are not willing to give up beauty. Because revisionists often write from specific contexts, their work can give the most concrete sense of advocates' point that beauty and character are complexly and importantly related. Revisionists will also critique the social practices which surround beauty.

2 | BEAUTY ADVOCATES

Beauty advocacy is, in some sense, the most intuitive position: beauty is a good thing, perhaps a *core* good thing – so we should seek it out where we can, whether in beautiful minds or beautiful bodies. Many philosophical traditions have linked personal beauty and morality, while prioritizing a beautiful mind over a beautiful body. We find the connection in ancient Greek philosophy (for example, the *Symposium*), classical Chinese philosophy (Gier, 2001; Kim, 2006; Mullis, 2017), Buddhism (Cooper, 2017), and Yoruba philosophy (Fayemi, 2018; Ikuenobe, 2016). Many traditions have a concept of a "sage," who "transcends the ordinarily experienced world," and is therefore beautiful (Kidd, 2017, p. 172).[1] In contemporary ethics, Elaine Scarry suggests beauty is "a starting place for education" (2013, p. 28) while Nancy Sherman (2005) and Yuriko Saito (2016) both recognize the link between personality and personal appearance.[2] While approaches to moral agency vary, anyone who thinks we have some control over our appearance will link appearance and agency. This view is compatible with a wide variety of beauty norms (as the multi-cultural list above indicates). And linking beauty and personal agency in this way means philosophers can avoid an intuitive worry: when beauty is just appearance, it might just be due to luck – so we should bracket it in our responses to others and evaluations of ourselves.

It is not always clear how we should understand the beauty that advocates link, even attribute, to character. It includes physical appearance, but not only physical appearance, and can't simply mean "attractiveness standards." Perhaps beauty is "pleasing perfection...meeting or approaching some ideal which we hold for the human form," a construction which permits some diversity (Parsons, 2016, p. 111). To keep the focus on character, we can narrow the beauty ideal to character-revealing "expressive features" (Parsons, 2016, p. 118). Like the "beautiful sage" view, this idea makes beauty a physical revelation of inner character. Kathleen Higgins similarly appeals to personal character,

contrasting beauty with the "kitsch" aesthetic ideals glamour and flawlessness (2000). Beautiful people are "radiant by virtue of something about [their] own nature," while glamour is due to one's environment (Higgins, 2000, pp. 101–2).[3] Higgins understands beauty as "an ideal of balance and health that is neither self-conscious nor a direct consequence of deliberate effort" (2000, p. 104). Indeed, though she makes a space for beautification, she wants beauty to be balanced with other features of a full life. So, her recommendation is that we take our beauty for granted. We should prioritize the cultivation of character, which will include various aesthetic practices, but would prevent fixating on the purely physical (and developing the associated vices).

One objection to the "perfection" view comes from Tobin Siebers's idea that imperfections, even deformities, have been central to beauty. Siebers argues, "Beauty always maintains an underlying sense of disability," and we would not appreciate a two-armed Venus de Milo (2010, p. 543) Siebers's concern is mostly with artworks, but as the Venus de Milo example indicates, actual bodies and representations of bodies can be closely linked when it comes to aesthetic evaluation. His account of disability aesthetics "does not embrace genius, bodily integrity, and health as standards of beauty" but takes up disability as a "critical framework for questioning aesthetic presuppositions … and as a value in its own right" (Siebers, 2010, p. 546). Siebers's account challenges the way character-first advocates de-emphasize physicality (though they often return to it after all – see Higgins's appeal to "health"). However, Siebers shares with Higgins an objection to flawlessness – Nazi art, for example, represents flawless human bodies and, because of this, tends to be kitsch. So, there may be a way for "perfection" advocates to avoid ableism, though the specifics need working out.

The link between character, judgment, and aesthetic presentation includes "invisible" aspects of a person, too. James H. P. Lewis (2023) argues that speech can be appropriately evaluated as beautiful and that "the aesthetic qualities of speech can sometimes provide epistemic access to (dis-)valuable qualities of people's characters" (11). He identifies two worries about this connection: first, that aesthetic judgment of speech just reflects various prejudices, and second, that the aesthetic qualities of speech are unrelated to a person's value (2023, p. 6). The first worry is about injustice and the second about relevance or luck. Lewis provides several examples to demonstrate the applicability of beauty to speech, where beauty is a universal judgment and liking "is a way of responding to a person as being finally valuable" (2023, p. 10). For beauty advocates who emphasize character or subjectivity, beauty and habituated appearance will be closely connected.

Sara Protasi makes beauty in the beholder, not the beheld. She suggests a "Loving Gaze" view: "the most beautiful individuals are the most lovable ones, independently of what they look like" (2017, p. 99). Protasi's account seeks to keep beauty honorific while acknowledging a host of ethical concerns, both negative and positive. Protasi roots the view in intimate personal relationships and the way they acculturate us to appreciate individuals' appearances as we appreciate their substance. One worry here is that basing beauty in friendship relies too much on individuals, and so beauty could still be vulnerable to some skeptical critiques. A related view is Panos Paris's defense of moral beauty: virtues are beautiful and vices are ugly, so virtuous people are more beautiful than vicious ones (2018, p. 655). On these accounts, cultivating our own character will be partly other-regarding, since self-cultivation involves multifaceted attention to other people.

We should acknowledge here that beauty advocacy often comes with caveats. One of these is skepticism about beautiful human bodies. Confucius complained he could not find someone who loved virtue as much as "female beauty" (2003, p. 9.18, 15.13). However, here we also find an early version of the slipperiness of "beauty" that occurs in many skeptical accounts. The word translated as "beauty" can also be translated as "female beauty" and as "sex."[4] So, the skepticism is not really about *beauty*, but sexuality, beauty standards, and appetites. One well-known philosophical product of this worry is the concept of "disinterested" beauty, where we appreciate beautiful objects without any motive.[5] Another philosophical product is rejecting disinterest, particularly disinterestedness with respect to the human body. Though feminist philosophers critique beauty, they also pay close attention to bodily appearances – recognizing that embodiment and femininity have been closely associated (Eaton, 2008a; Korsmeyer, 2004). Contrary to Confucius' complaint, feminists sometimes "rediscover" the beauty of male bodies and the pleasure (interested or otherwise) women might take in them (Bordo, 2000). On other occasions, feminists take up a version of Confucius'

skepticism, aiming their attention at beauty's negative effects on women's agency. This will be one starting point for the next section.

3 | "BEAUTY" SKEPTICS AND BEAUTY SKEPTICS

Beauty skeptics level several critiques at beauty and its relationship with agency. I identify two orientations: skeptics who focus on beauty's social role and skeptics who have an aesthetic project. It is not clear that social skeptics mean by "beauty" the same thing advocates do. They still, however, discuss an aesthetic concept (or set of aesthetic concepts), so their work is relevant to our project here. By contrast, aesthetic skeptics generally do mean the same thing as advocates – or, at least, take themselves to mean the same.

There are three things to note about social skeptics. First, they focus mostly on the social or ethical context in which aesthetic judgments and activities occur. Second, by "beauty," they tend to mean aesthetic practices or standards of appearance/evaluation which are "expected" or "normalized" - this sense of beauty dominates the empirical literature, as well.[6] Third, they often make justice-oriented critiques of those judgments. We can also think about social skepticism according to the observer/observed framework: judgments of appearance are unjust and expectations for beauty labor are unfairly distributed.

Social skeptics can draw on empirical research to ground the view that complying with beauty norms improves people's lives, while deviating from the norms has negative effects. Preferential treatment for attractive people, who comply with the norms, is called "lookism." Neither compliance nor deviance may be squarely in an individual's control; likewise, cultivating more capacious personal taste may be futile if "we are hard-wired" to find certain physical features attractive (Minerva, 2017, p. 188). Further, lookism results in lower quality of life for ugly people, who make less money while spending more to compensate for their unattractiveness, and are thought to be less intelligent, competent, or socially adept (Minerva, 2017, pp. 180–82).[7] The social benefits of compliance suggest some of the philosophical objections to it: social benefits may be illusory or have negative downstream effects, and those who are able to comply may be harmed by the expectations or the work that goes in to satisfying those expectations. It is not always clear if this understanding of attractiveness actually touches beauty at all, at least in the way many advocates conceive of it – indeed, Minerva's paper is published in *Bioethics*, suggesting the problem is primarily social, not aesthetic. Higgins, who appeals to "health" in conceptualizing beauty, should probably be concerned about this critique of attractiveness – which purports to originate in biological truths. But even the "hard-wired" preferences could be easily divorced from an honorific view of beauty.

Lookism may impair agency by harming autonomy. Andrew Mason takes a broad view of lookism, arguing that "the widespread practice of commenting upon and judging the appearances of others" may be "demeaning" even when no one involved takes the practice to be so (2021, pp. 315–317). On Mason's view, lookism impairs autonomy because it undermines our reflective capacities, or the pursuit of the good life, or forces us to adopt a version of the good life we do not endorse (2021, p. 326). By impairing epistemic abilities, lookism impairs moral agency. Thomas Spiegel (2023) identifies another ethical-epistemic harm: lookism creates epistemic injustice. Ugly people may realize they receive negative treatment because of their appearance, but because ugliness is not a socially acceptable explanation, appealing to it may result in testimonial injustice and gaslighting (Spiegel, 2023, pp. 54–55). Attractive people may, on the contrary, develop an inflated view of themselves, including their epistemic assets, because of the privileges they receive (also the premise of "The Bubble" episode of *30 Rock*). Both accounts demonstrate the three characteristics of social skeptics listed above. Mason suggests the social benefits on the "right side" of lookism may be illegitimate, in addition to the disadvantages accruing to those on the "wrong side"; similarly, Spiegel identifies injustices which result from lookism and negatively affect the agency of attractive and unattractive persons.

Heather Widdows offers further worries about impaired agency in the context of personal appearance. Despite the real pleasures and goods of beautification, "if we invest too much, value appearance too much, we do not flourish, we are not happy" (2018, p. 253). Few people would object to the view that over-valuing something has

negative effects. Widdows tries to show that over-valuing appearance makes beautification a moral demand, while "the more our sense of self is determined by appearance (actual and possible), the more we judge ourselves and others by appearance, and the more we invest our identity and meaning in appearance and less in other capabilities" (2018, p. 193). Though Widdows makes perceptive points about the demandingness of beautification norms, little of her work specifically attends to beauty. Rather, the objections are analogous to criticizing working conditions in nail salons. Like other philosophers in this section, Widdows is skeptical about an aesthetic phenomenon, appearance norms having to do with attractiveness, and the moral weight that phenomenon attracts. Her work is an ethical critique of a set of aesthetic practices, not an investigation into beauty.

These skeptical accounts are important for aestheticians, just as inquiries into the relationship between appreciation and artists' morality are relevant. Justice-oriented critiques of beauty labor, not just aesthetic standards, have even closer parallels to such questions in philosophy of art. Beauty labor is an unambiguously aesthetic practice entwined with self-understanding, aesthetic agency, and moral agency. Beauty skeptics note that beautification remains *subject* to the aesthetic standards which partly constitute lookism. These standards include expectations about who performs beauty labor. Both trans and ciswomen internalize an obligation to perform such work: "they claim that becoming more attractive is something they *owe* to others" (Archer & Ware, 2018, p. 122).[8] Men are not exempt from aesthetic obligations, but "they are not held to them, and do not feel them as keenly" (Archer & Ware, 2018, p. 122). The aesthetic obligations men feel may be more about self-presentation than attractiveness, which means they may be agential without raising worries about, for example, sexual self-objectification.[9] For example, transmen may pursue a masculine aesthetic ideal (where "masculine" can be diverse) – but such an ideal is understood through individual character (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022). Alternatively, men's sexual self-objectification occurs in a radically different context than it does for women (Martins et al., 2007).

While aesthetics-focused skeptics tend to acknowledge these social critiques, they differ from the social skeptics in two ways. First, they do mean beauty, rather than attractiveness standards (though such standards remain relevant). Second, they generate alternative aesthetic ideals, while social skeptics tend not to. As a result, they direct agency toward "opting out" of beauty or pursuing other aesthetic goods – they make aesthetic commitments. These differences reflect a different emphasis on the aesthetic: social skeptics focus on the context in which we find beauty, not beauty itself – beauty is, in a sense, incidental to their objections, just as beef is incidental to the environmental case against eating it.

Many critics argue beauty impairs personal agency and makes some people's lives worse. They sometimes make a stronger version of the social skeptic's justice critique, since they are not critiquing a social practice but an aesthetic standard. Mary Wollstonecraft argued that "the supposed beauty of women's weakness" was a mechanism of objectification and "by valuing women for their bodies and reducing them to 'alluring objects', men...hurt society" (de Freitas Boe, 2011, p. 355).[10] On another view, skeptics accept the advocates' idea that beauty is a universal good, like kindness, but find it is put to dehumanizing effect.[11] Just as we may fail to be kind, we may fail to be beautiful. Beauty becomes dehumanizing when the aesthetic failure is treated the same as the moral one, or when entire groups of people are excluded from beauty through no action of their own (Armstrong, 1996). Such groups could include disabled people, fat people, people of color, and old people. Nöel Carroll traces the dehumanizing effect of beauty to Kant, who argued that beauty indicated "a perfect example of a category" such as "human being" (2000, p. 37ff). Linking beauty with "humanity" raises the worry that being less than beautiful means being less than perfect – and so less than human. This view coincides with the rise of colonialism and white supremacy (Dyer, 1997; Mitter, 2017; Peiss, 2012; Velazco y Trianosky, 2012), but we would object to it even in a *Star Trekkian* paradise. Perfection is simply not something we ought to demand of fellow human beings, nor should we count against them their falling short of it.[12] We have already seen advocates who argue the exclusionary idea of beauty exists, but is mistaken (Siebers, above) and will see further challenges from revisionist accounts.

Agency is ambiguously relevant to this kind of aesthetic skepticism. If perfection and beauty are the products of luck, we could still be evaluated for what we do with what our luck gives us Or, only our appreciative agency might be meaningfully relevant, meaning just as we seek to develop a finely-grained and comprehensive moral sense, so we should seek to develop our aesthetic sense.

Stefanie Snider also argues that beauty works "through exclusion" (Snider, 2018, p. 353). Instead of beauty, Snider urges an embrace of "ugliness," and looks to fat women photographers Laura Aguilar and Iu Susiraja to model aesthetically valuable works which, in Snider's view, reject beauty. Aguilar's photographs, such as a nude self-portrait, "assert her subjectivity … she is unmistakably and unapologetically fat … .a stareable subject in this photograph, calling for a lingering gaze …" (Snider, 2018, p. 350). Snider's photographs don't try to "expand" beauty the way body positive pin-up photographs do, but rather present her as exempt from it. Susiraja's photographs of herself create "multiple levels of bizarreness," where physical beauty is simply not a relevant aesthetic ideal (Snider, 2018, p. 351).[13] There are two things to note here. First, Snider's positive project recognizes a very traditional form of aesthetic agency: art making. Second, she unites that traditional aesthetic agency with a novel appreciative project, as well as an under-discussed object for such a project – the human body.

Neither Snider nor the justice-oriented critics offer an ameliorative project: they aren't looking to "rescue" beauty. But they may accept an abolitionist project targeting beauty and ugliness, as well as the narrow, culturally-specific attractiveness standards that the social skeptics critique. Though aesthetic skeptics provide mostly pessimistic analysis, they leave more room for constructive projects (and so, more opportunities to exercise aesthetic agency) than the social skeptics do. Aesthetic skeptics suggest agency is best exercised in developing new ways the world could be. Their projects fit well with Audre Lorde's (1984) ethico-aesthetic work in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury."

4 | BEAUTY REVISIONISTS

One needn't be a complete skeptic to envision new possibilities for personal beauty. Revisionists take on board skeptical critiques of beauty and its social contexts, but still find something to advocate for in beauty. Beauty revisionism emphasizes personhood, seeing aesthetic appreciation of others as linked with a recognition of personhood and bodily aesthetic activity as an "essentially human act" (Taylor, 2016, p. 2). Partly because of this conception of body aesthetic practices, revisionists often point to subjectivity in their accounts, highlighting the relationship an individual bears to their physical embodiment and, just as often, the collective identities which also contextualize beauty.

Beauty revisionists may work in the space between social and aesthetic understandings of beauty. Feminists may ask, as Deborah Rhode does, how "to develop a concept of beauty that is a source of pleasure rather than shame, and that enhances, rather than dictates, self-worth" (2016, p. 81).[14] The question was asked earlier by Sandra Bartky, who sought a "nonrepressive narcissism" and an "expanded" set of "ideas of the beautiful… so altered that we will perceive ourselves and one another very differently than we do now" (1990, p. 42). These questions look at beauty standards and beauty as an aesthetic ideal; additionally, they direct our attention to appreciative habits as well as self-cultivation. Ann J. Cahill's (2003) philosophical analysis of communal beautification provides one possible account of "nonoppressive narcissism." Communal beautification "can be intensely pleasurable. This pleasure … arises from women's embrace not of socially accepted values but of the aesthetic, embodied, and intersubjective quality of the experience" (Cahill, 2003, p. 44).[15] Cecilie Neumann makes a similar argument: despite the well-known problems with fashion modeling as an industry, modeling may help women liberate themselves from "the beauty/narcissism double bind of appearance" (2017, p. 393). Simultaneous subject and object, models find themselves empowered by their beauty and self-control and momentarily freed from shame around beauty and sexuality. Racial justice movements argued that acknowledging a person's beauty is part of acknowledging their personhood (Banks, 2000; Craig, 2002, 2006). Janell Hobson describes an "aesthetic of the black female body" that glories in black women's butts "as a site of beauty and resistance" (2003, p. 88).[16] Hobson's black feminist aesthetic "involves not only recovering the … body but also reclaiming agency and subjectivity" (2003, p. 98). To begin this reclamation, Hobson looks to Carla Williams and Coreen Simpson's photographs, dance troupe Urban Bush Women, and childhood games for "reaffirm[ation] that our bodies are fine, normal, capable, and beautiful" (2003, p. 103).[17] A second concern for anti-racist beauty is recognizing that black aesthetic practices are not simply "alternatives" to white aesthetic practices, but manifest beauty in their own right and on their own terms (Tate, 2009; Taylor, 2016). Frazier (2023) makes a similar argument:

fat people can use beauty labor to resist antifatness. By exercising their own aesthetic judgment, fat people can "force society" to take their bodies "*on their own terms*" (2023, p. 234 Frazier's emphasis).

Additionally, revisionists may emphasize our developing broader taste in bodies as part of duties to resist oppression.[18] This is part of Hobson's project: black women learn to appreciate their own bodies as well as other black women's bodies. In "Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression," A. W. Eaton argues that aesthetic distaste for fat bodies is part of fat oppression (2016, p. 38). Eaton adopts an Aristotelian approach to develop better attitudes toward fat people by cultivating an aesthetic appreciation of fatness. Part of self-cultivation is making the right aesthetic judgments about other bodies. More generally, our obligations to develop appropriate taste in bodies might track our obligations to relate to other people. Lintott and Irvin's (2016) proposal in "Sexy Subjects" to consider sexiness as subjectivity also links this kind of obligation with aesthetic judgment. People are sexy, on this account, because of their particularity, and finding people sexy is a way of recognizing that particularity.[19] The expansive and flexible notion of sexiness that results from their argument rejects mainstream gender norms and ableist bodily standards. We can also recognize our own particularity, as in Céline Lebouef's proposal of "sensualism" as a method of redressing "bodily alienation" created by beauty standards emphasizes bodily enjoyment (2019, p. 16). Alongside a wider appreciative habit, sensualism creates "a positive relation to one's body … by developing an *inner* appreciation of the body through physical practices" (Lebouef, 2019, p. 16). While Lebouef's argument partly rejects harmful beauty standards, sensualism coexists with beauty. These accounts emphasize internal qualities of persons and their bodies.

But external qualities do not vanish from the revisionist picture entirely! In "Resisting Body Oppression," Irvin offers a more detailed account of how and why we should develop aesthetic appreciation for bodies; as embodied persons but also as objects. She again steers the conversation away from beauty, instead emphasizing aesthetic pleasure: "there may be some things that are so recalcitrantly banal that even the most open and creative mind cannot find within them any source of aesthetic delight. But living human bodies, all of them, do have very rich affordances…. The human body – every human body – is an incredibly replete aesthetic object" (2017, pp. 13–14). Here, Irvin directs attention to features of human bodies which may not be agential at all.[20] The relevant agency is the agency of the beholder. Irvin's account differs from Protasi's in not being strictly focused on beauty – it is expansive as well as revisionist.

Revisionists aim for a liminal space between the social and the aesthetic. This means they can provide perspective on the intersection of the abstract values so beloved by philosophy and the daily practices in which those ideals manifest. For example, Lintott and Irvin rescue a mainstream aesthetic concept that might give justice-oriented philosophers pause. They share with Eaton a skepticism about the "cultural content" of aesthetic values, or appearance norms. In "Resisting Body Oppression," Irvin suggests a very *broad* aesthetic response, one which includes judgments of beauty (though it also includes other kinds of "delight" – and so may be perfectly compatible with beauty abolitionist positions). All three accounts suggest appreciative agency is properly directed to embodied persons. In emphasizing *persons*, revisionists accounts build subjectivity into their concept of beauty. Our aesthetic appreciation is properly about the way a specific person manifests aesthetically.

Revisionists offer perhaps the clearest view of the relationship between agency and beauty. They identify a problem, ask what ought to be done about it, and why. That revisionism is so actionable probably helps it avoid the nebulousness demonstrated in some advocacy accounts. Additionally, in directing aesthetic appreciation to other persons as subjects, revisionists make others' agency part of the concept of beauty. Because revisionists acknowledge and respond to specific social and aesthetic problems, they also provide a framework for critical appreciation and evaluation of others' agency. Agency is already contextualized.

5 | CONCLUSION

I will conclude by discussing the themes and questions which emerge from a more holistic consideration of the literature, in the hopes that this paper enables novel projects. I have two themes, and several questions. First, I take it that

all the philosophers address real or perceived tensions in the way an aesthetic good manifests in actual life. Beauty is a fraught context for exercising personal agency – and it seems that most philosophers would agree that beauty standards bear significant responsibility for the trouble. Second, despite this snarl, beauty specifically, and embodied aesthetic values generally, remain important contexts for personal agency. But we need to bring other ideas and a rich contextual background to bear on the evaluative part of the project, whether we are evaluating our own lives or the lives of others.

Which suggests the first question: while I have surveyed different contexts for understanding and evaluating beauty, how do the participants in these debates understand agency? Advocates' turn to character as the source of personal beauty might de-emphasize aesthetic agency, even as it prioritizes other kinds of self-cultivation. A.W. Eaton's revisionist project, which focuses on cultivating taste is an exception here; her account also addresses the wariness which character-based ethics often take toward deliberate effort. "Trying too hard" has long been an ethical concern as well as an aesthetic flaw. Some social skeptics, such as Widdows, might also worry about deliberate effort – but others, like Minerva, *advocate* deliberate and direct responses. Aesthetic skeptics likewise seem to prioritize deliberate effort, as do several of the revisionist accounts. What other differences might there be? How should we draw on literature in, for example, moral psychology to pursue these questions?

Second, it is sometimes murky how incompatible projects from different factions truly are. That "beauty" is polysemous certainly introduces some muck, as do more substantive disagreements. Revisionists and advocates like Protasi, who wish to hold onto beauty while eschewing beauty standards, might not be very different from each other at all. Similarly, many revisionists could happily pursue the aesthetic and personal possibilities of ugliness. But does anything stop social skeptics with purely critical account from signing on to Parsons's proposal, for example? And what stops Parsons from embracing ugliness or strangeness, as Snider asks?

Third, how do aesthetic goods relate to each other and to beauty? Advocates and revisionists usually want something special from beauty, but beauty seems to happily coexist with subordinate concepts, like poise.[21] *Vogue* editor Lynn Yaeger's personal style is thought-provoking, playful, and compelling; her commitment and creativity are admirable, and for all I know she is a wonderful person. But saying something like, "Yaeger is beautiful because of the way her character is reflected in her aesthetic self-presentation, even though her clothes and makeup are deliberately eccentric," does her a disservice. That is, calling her beautiful misrepresents what is aesthetically good about her style and, since she does not attempt to conform to beauty standards, erases at least some of the admirable things about her character. Could an aesthetically "lucky" person do the same – could they "cancel" their beauty through adornment practices which express their virtues? We should also ask how Snider's constructive rejection of beauty fits with Siebers's argument that beauty has always relied on disability.

The context in which beauty appears affects the way we evaluate it. As philosophy develops a richer and more nuanced understanding of social contexts, we discover new ways to consider beauty and related aesthetic ideals. This sheds light on our moral lives as well as our aesthetic ones.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

ENDNOTES

[1] For a slightly different construal of the beauty's role in exemplarism, see (Paris, 2022, p. 202).

[2] Brogaard (2016) also argues that personality manifests in appearance, with support from empirical studies. Doran (2021) finds that "moral beauty and ugliness exist partly because moral character tends to modify our perception of appearances" (1). Sanders et al. (2022) find a link between judgments about a person's attractiveness and judgments about their life's meaningfulness.

³ Carol Gould defends glamour as a neutral aesthetic property that "arises from a disposition to project, often without conscious intention, an imagined range of possible, not yet (or perhaps ever) actual experiences and lives. It inspires the fantasies of others…" (2005, p. 240). Gould treats glamour as distinct from beauty, so her analysis could potentially support any number of positions with respect to personal beauty.

⁴ For a learned but informal discussion of the translation and attendant philosophical issues, see (Im, 2009).

⁵ The particular motive we are supposed to lack varies. For Kant, it is desire or interested pleasure. Other Enlightenment figures attempted similar moves (Shelley, 2022). Skeptics include Nietzsche (Zangwill, 2013).

⁶ The history of beautification and beauty standards in the West is engagingly discussed in Peiss (2012).

⁷ Minerva explicitly treats beauty and physical attractiveness as equivalent – this is how the empirical literature from which she draws conceives of the relationship – but notes that, actually, physical appearance and attractiveness are not interchangeable (2017, n. 16). The costs of being unattractive are rehearsed in most papers on lookism, so in the interests of space I have not repeated them here.

⁸ Transwomen's relationship with makeup shares a double-bind with ciswomen's, while "the idea that external appearance is what makes someone a "real" woman is the very thing that many trans women have committed themselves to fighting" (Alptraum, 2017).

⁹ Teasing aesthetic obligations from ethical ones is tricky work, and our aesthetic and ethical obligations may not always be differentiable. Eaton (2008b) argues that some of our ethico-aesthetic obligations are to *ourselves*, not to others, and these include choices about self-presentation. Kubala (2020) provides an overview of debates about aesthetic obligation.

¹⁰ De Freitas Boe argues that conservative feminist Hannah More goes further than Wollstonecraft in repudiating beauty: "More argues [women] do not benefit from being labeled beauties, yet she also strenuously disagrees with women's attempts to distinguish themselves as performers, artists, or connoisseurs." (2011, p. 356).

¹¹ This is compatible with beauty being socially constructed and/or historically conditioned – it has to be, given the historical work many of the skeptics do. It may also be compatible, like critiques of lookism, with beauty pluralism – skeptics are often difficult to pin down on this point.

¹² It's fair to critique others. It's *not* fair to fault them for being vulnerable to critique.

¹³ Snider discusses these works as representations of physical beauty, which brackets (or perhaps simply elides) the difference between beautiful people and beautiful art works. This difference is both interesting and relevant. Shona McAndrew's recent work is both beautiful and presents her as beautiful and desirable, partly through references to other erotically-tinged fine art works and through the use of rose light (Saltz, 2023). Art critics have sometimes thought, perhaps for specious reasons, Rembrandt's *Danae* a beautiful work which does not depict a beautiful person (Bal, 1993). While Susiraja's photographs aim at the bizarre, not the beautiful, we might think Aguilar depicts people who are "not beautiful" in beautiful photographs. Siebers (2010), above, provides further resources for this topic. Hobson (2003), below, also appeals to artworks for their ability to present alternative models of aesthetic value. More work on this link would be helpful in an era where "representation" in art and media is frequently, though fuzzily, discussed.

¹⁴ This dynamic is not limited to bodily beauty; for an overview see the latter half of Sartwell (2022). Many of the sources I discuss here are also discussed as responses to lookism in Ravasio (2022). Ravasio groups the arguments differently and does not emphasize agency; his essay is helpful for thinking about responses to lookism and what we want from our notion of beauty.

¹⁵ Beautification overlaps adornment, though adornment practices can also be part of a skeptical project. For discussions of adornment generally, including beautification see (Davies, 2020). Adornment may be an important feature of gender expression for non-binary people, though often absent beautification (Cray, 2021). More generally, beautification has limits as a motive for adornment (Johnson, 2021).

¹⁶ Hobson (2005) offers a more wide-ranging discussion of black beauty.

¹⁷ Two recent accounts of contemporary and traditional images against which Hobson reacts are Davidson's discussion of Kara Walker's rebuke to colonial images (2016) and Tate's account of British advertisers' use of mixed race beauty to gird up a notion of Great Britain as simultaneously "a multicultural, tolerant nation" and a white nation (2016, p. 102).

¹⁸ For an argument against such a duty, at least in the case of beauty standards, see (Widdows, 2022).

¹⁹ Irvin and Lintott's account speaks to the way partners of transmen undergoing body modifications handle those changes and maintain a sense that their partner is sexy (Bishop, 2016).

²⁰ This feature of her view is criticized for removing the aspirational aspect of beauty and the aesthetic's ability to motivate positive judgments of people (Lewis, 2023; Protasi, 2017). It is not clear to me if this objection stands against "Sexy Subjects."

[21] One attempt to sort through some subordinate goods is in Menninghaus et al. (2019), which catalogs folk distinctions between beauty, elegance, grace, and sexiness.

REFERENCES

Aboim, S., & Vasconcelos, P. (2022). What Does It Mean to Be a Man? Trans Masculinities, Bodily Practices, and Reflexive Embodiment. *Men and Masculinities*, *25*(1), 43–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X211008519

Alptraum, L. (2017). Makeup Can Give Trans Women Freedom — But It Can Also Take It Away. *Racked* (blog). http://www.racked.com/2017/3/23/14937266/trans-women-makeup

Archer, A., & Ware, L. (2018). Beyond the Call of Beauty: Everyday Aesthetic Demands Under Patriarchy. *The Monist*, *101*(1), 114–127. https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onx029

Armstrong, M. (1996). 'The Effects of Blackness': Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *54*(3), 213. https://doi.org/10.2307/431624

Bal, M. (1993). His Master's Eye. In D. M. Levin (Ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (pp. 379–404). University of California Press.

Banks, I. (2000). *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power and Black Women's Consciousness*. New York University Press.

Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Thinking Gender. Routledge.

Bishop, K. (2016). Body Modification and Trans Men: The Lived Realities of Gender Transition and Partner Intimacy. *Body & Society*, *22*(1), 62–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15612895

Bordo, S. (2000). Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body. In P. Z. Brand (Ed.), *Beauty Matters* (pp. 112–154). Indiana University Press.

Brogaard, B. (2016). Perceptual Appearances of Personality. *Philosophical Topics*, *44*(2), 83–103. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201644218

Cahill, A. J. (2003). Feminist Pleasure and Feminine Beautification. *Hypatia*, *18*(4), 42–64. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2003.tb01412.x

Carroll, N. (2000). Ethnicity, Race, and Monstrosity: The Rhetorics of Horror and Humor. In P. Z. Brand (Ed.), *Beauty Matters* (pp. 37–56). Indiana University Press.

Confucius. (2003). *Analects*. Translated by Edward G. Slingerland. Hackett Pub. Co.

Cooper, D. E. (2017). Buddhism, Beauty, and Virtue. In K. Higgins, S. Sonia, & S. Maira (Eds.), *Artistic Visions and the Promise of Beauty: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (pp. 125–137). Springer.

Craig, M. L. (2002). *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*. Oxford University Press.

Craig, M. L. (2006). Race, Beauty, and the Tangled Knot of a Guilty Pleasure. *Feminist Theory*, *7*(2), 159–177. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700106064414

Cray, W. D. (2021). Some Considerations Regarding Adornment, the Gender 'Binary,' and Gender Expression. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *79*(4), 488–492. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpab051

Davidson, M. del G. (2016). Black Silhouettes on White Walls: Kara Walker's Magic Lantern. In S. Irvin (Ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (pp. 15–36). Oxford University Press.

Davies, S. (2020). *Adornment What Self-Decoration Tells Us about Who We Are*. Bloomsbury. http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=5993975

de Freitas Boe, A. (2011). 'I Call Beauty a Social Quality': Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More's Rejoinder to Edmund Burke's Body Politic of the Beautiful. *Women's Writing*, *18*(3), 348–366. https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2011.577296

Doran, R. P. (2021). Moral Beauty, Inside and Out. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *99*(2), 396–414. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2020.1778757

Dyer, R. (1997). *White*. Routledge.

Eaton, A. W. (2008a). Feminist Philosophy of Art. *Philosophy Compass*, *3*(5), 873–893. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00154.x

Eaton, A. W. (2016). Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression. In S. Irvin (Ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (pp. 37–59). Oxford University Press.

Eaton, M. M. (2008b). Aesthetic Obligations. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *66*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-594X.2008.00283.x

Fayemi, A. K. (2018). Racial Identity, Aesthetic Surgery and Yorùbá African Values. *Developing World Bioethics*, *18*(3), 250–257. https://doi.org/10.1111/dewb.12180

Frazier, C. (2023). Beauty Labor as a Tool to Resist Antifatness. *Hypatia*, *38*(2), 231–250. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2023.22

Gier, N. F. (2001). The Dancing Ru: A Confucian Aesthetics of Virtue. *Philosophy East and West*, *51*(2), 280–305. https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2001.0022

Gould, C. S. (2005). Glamour as an Aesthetic Property of Persons. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *63*(3), 237–247. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8529.2005.00204.x

Higgins, K. (2000). Beauty and Its Kitsch Competitors. In P. Z. Brand (Ed.), *Beauty Matters* (pp. 87–111). Indiana University Press.

Hobson, J. (2003). The 'Batty' Politic: Towards an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body. *Hypatia*, *18*(4), 87–105. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2003.tb01414.x

Hobson, J. (2005). *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*. Routledge.

Ikuenobe, P. (2016). Good and Beautiful: A Moral-Aesthetic View of Personhood in African Communal Traditions. *Essays in Philosophy*, *17*(1), 125–163. https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1546

Im, M. (2009). On de 德 and Se 色. https://warpweftandway.com/on-de-%E5%BE%B7-and-se-%E8%89%B2/

Irvin, S. (2017). Resisting Body Oppression: An Aesthetic Approach. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, *3*(4), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2017.4.3

Johnson, M. (2021). Adorning Intentions. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *79*(4), 504–507. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpab053

Kidd, I. J. (2017). Beauty, Virtue, and Religious Exemplars. *Religious Studies*, *53*(2), 171–181. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412515000578

Kim, Ha P. (2006). Confucius's Aesthetic Concept of Noble Man: Beyond Moralism. *Asian Philosophy*, *16*(2), 111–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/09552360600772736

Korsmeyer, C. (2004). *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*. Routledge.

Kubala, R. (2020). Aesthetic Obligations. *Philosophy Compass*, *15*(12). https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12712

Leboeuf, C. (2019). Anatomy of a Thigh Gap. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, *5*(1), Article 2. https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/fpq/article/view/7312/5962

Lewis, J. H. P. (2023). The Musicality of Speech. *Philosophers' Imprint*, *22*(0). https://doi.org/10.3998/phimp.643

Lintott, S., & Irvin, S. (2016). Sex Objects and Sexy Subjects: A Feminist Reclamation of Sexiness. In S. Irvin (Ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (pp. 299–319). Oxford University Press.

Lorde, A. (1984). Poetry Is Not a Luxury. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 36–39). Crossing Press.

Martins, Y., Tiggemann, M., & Kirkbride, A. (2007). Those Speedos Become Them: The Role of Self-Objectification in Gay and Heterosexual Men's Body Image. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *33*(5), 634–647. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167206297403

Mason, A. (2021). What's Wrong with Everyday Lookism? *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, *20*(3), 315–335. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470594X20982051

Menninghaus, W., Wagner, V., Kegel, V., Knoop, C. A., & Schlotz, W. (2019). Beauty, Elegance, Grace, and Sexiness Compared. *PLoS One*, *14*(6), e0218728. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0218728

Minerva, F. (2017). The Invisible Discrimination Before Our Eyes: A Bioethical Analysis. *Bioethics*, *31*(3), 180–189. https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.12327

Mitter, P. (2017). Western Theories of Beauty and Non-Western Peoples. In K. Higgins, S. Sikka, & S. Maira (Eds.), *Artistic Visions and the Promise of Beauty: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (pp. 79–89). Springer.

Mullis, E. (2017). Thinking Through an Embodied Confucian Aesthetics of Persons. In K. Higgins, S. Maira, & S. Sikka (Eds.), *Artistic Visions and the Promise of Beauty: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (pp. 139–144). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Neumann, C. B. (2017). A Dangerous Subject: The Fashion Model and the Beauty/Narcissism Double Bind. *Hypatia*, *32*(2), 380–396. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12319

Paris, P. (2018). The Empirical Case for Moral Beauty. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *96*(4), 642–656. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2017.1411374

Paris, P. (2022). The Aesthetics of Ethics: Exemplarism, Beauty, and the Psychology of Morality. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, *56*(4), 601–625. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-020-09793-8

Parsons, G. (2016). The Merrickites. In S. Irvin (Ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (pp. 110–126). Oxford University Press.

Peiss, K. L. (2012). *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Protasi, S. (2017). The Perfect Bikini Body: Can We All Really Have It? Loving Gaze as an Antioppressive Beauty Ideal. *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy*, *6*(2), 93–101. https://doi.org/10.1002/tht3.236

Ravasio, M. (2022). Engineering Human Beauty. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2022.2048311

Rhode, D. L. (2016). Appearance as a Feminist Issue. In S. Irvin (Ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (pp. 81–93). Oxford University Press.

Saito, Y. (2016). Body Aesthetics and the Cultivation of Moral Virtues. In S. Irvin (Ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (pp. 225–242). Oxford University Press.

Saltz, J. (2023). An Artist Reckons With the 'Fat' Body. *Vulture*. https://www.vulture.com/2023/03/an-artist-reckons-with-the-fat-body.html

Sanders, C. A., Jenkins, A. T., & King, L. A. (2022). Pretty, Meaningful Lives: Physical Attractiveness and Experienced and Perceived Meaning in Life. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *18*(6), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2022.2155222

Sartwell, C. (2022). Beauty. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Summer 2022. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/beauty/

Scarry, E. (2013). *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton University Press.

Shelley, J. (2022). 18th Century British Aesthetics. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Winter 2022. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/aesthetics-18th-british/

Sherman, N. (2005). The Look and Feel of Virtue. In C. Gill (Ed.), *Virtue, Norms, and Objectivity: Issues in Ancient and Modern Ethics* (pp. 59–82). Clarendon Press.

Siebers, T. (2010). *Disability Aesthetics*. Corporealities: Discourses of Disability. University of Michigan Press.

Snider, S. (2018). On the Limitations of the Rhetoric of Beauty: Embracing Ugliness in Contemporary Fat Visual Representations. In S. Rodrigues & E. Przybylo (Eds.), *On the Politics of Ugliness* (pp. 337–365). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76783-3_16

Spiegel, T. J. (2023). Lookism as Epistemic Injustice. *Social Epistemology*, *37*(1), 47–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2022.2076629

Tate, S. A. (2009). *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. Ashgate.

Tate, S. A. (2016). A Tale of Two Olympians: Beauty, 'Race,' Nation. In S. Irvin (Ed.), *Body Aesthetics* (pp. 94–109). Oxford University Press.

Taylor, P. C. (2016). *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. Foundations of the Philosophy of the Arts. Wiley.

Velazco y Trianosky, G. (2012). Savages, Wild Men, Monstrous Races: The Social Construction of Race in the Early Modern Era. In P. Z. Brand (Ed.), *Beauty Unlimited* (pp. 45–71). Indiana University Press.

Widdows, H. (2018). *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*. Princeton University Press.

Widdows, H. (2022). No Duty to Resist: Why Individual Resistance Is an Ineffective Response to Dominant Beauty Ideals. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, *122*(1), 27–46. https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoab014

Zangwill, N. (2013). Nietzsche on Kant on Beauty and Disinterest. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, *30*(1), 75–91. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43488059

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Madeline Martin-Seaver is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Florida. Her PhD is from the University of Oklahoma. Previously, she worked at Elon University and Auburn University.