Beauty And Ethics: Three Relations

by

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Abstract

After years of neglect, a renewed interest in beauty developed among many Western art critics, art practitioners and theorists of aesthetics in the 1990s. Beauty had fallen from favour in part because it was deemed politically and ethically suspect, both as complicit with the sociopolitical structures that yielded WWI and as a tool of oppression wielded against women and minorities. One wonders, however, whether the baby was thrown out with the bathwater. Even granted that beauty has been damaging in the ways alluded to, can it yet be ethically helpful in ways that were lost when we ceased to attend to beauty (at least in the realms of institutional art and aesthetic theory if not in the day to day)? What ethical benefits might we have overlooked?

The answer to this question depends partly on what one takes beauty to be. Beauty is a complex concept; there exist many competing and frequently contradictory accounts, often with deep roots, making the concept rife with internal contradictions. Rather than either attempt to reconcile conflicting accounts or address only one aspect of the concept, I will show that different sorts of relation to ethics emerge depending on how we approach beauty. I will present three different ways in which we can see beauty as related to ethics: beauty qua motivator of ethical relation, qua formal cause of ethical relation, and qua analogue of ethical relation.
The kinds of relation we see between beauty and ethics also depend on what style of ethics we consider. Despite the variety of approaches to beauty discussed, the connections I found tended to link beauty to particularistic versions of ethics. This may be due to beauty’s longstanding association with the realm of particulars, making for an easy fit with ethics that emphasize attention to particulars.
Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1
Introduction

1 The Neglect of Beauty

“[B]eauty is a relatively neglected topic in current moral philosophy,” writes Gabriel Richardson Lear in 2008 (“Aristotle on Moral Virtue” 116). Beauty, in contexts moral and otherwise, has indeed suffered neglect as a topic of serious inquiry among philosophers, art critics and practitioners since early in the last century. Arthur Danto tells the story of an early-twentieth-century “revolt against beauty,” whereby artists engaged in the project of “disconnecting beauty from art as an expression of moral revulsion against a society for whom beauty was a cherished value” (The Abuse of Beauty 46-8). In the wake of devastating wars, beauty seemed an inappropriate means for addressing the suffering that went on; it seemed at best irrelevant and at worst deceitfully consolatory. Danto quotes dadaist Max Ernst: “We have experienced the collapse into ridicule and shame of everything represented to us as just, true, and beautiful. My works of that period were not meant to attract people but to make people scream” (The Abuse of Beauty 48). So it was that beauty fell from view among fine art practitioners, critics and theorists, who often turned their attention instead to disgust (Danto The Abuse of Beauty 50).

Beauty may not have disappeared from view in daily life or in many of the private and local art practices that exist beyond the dominant aesthetic institutions, but it largely disappeared from the walls of many of the best-known contemporary institutions and also disappeared from talk about art and aesthetics. So it was that critic Dave Hickey, in reply to a question about what the issue of the nineties would be, said off-handedly, “beauty” and found himself met with uncomprehending silence: “‘Beauty’ just hovered there, a word without a language, quiet, amazing, and alien in that sleek institutional space” (The Invisible Dragon 2). Time had passed since the deliberate opposition to beauty recorded by Danto. When Hickey said the word ‘beauty’ at his eighties-era conference, the concept wasn’t opposed; rather, no one even seemed to know how to talk about it anymore. Hickey first published this story in 1991, and he started investigating, bringing beauty back into the light.

He was joined in this endeavour by Elaine Scarry, who in 1991 published a short book of two essays in which she identified a neglect of beauty in the humanities. This neglect came about,
she argued, on account of what she called “political complaints against it” (On Beauty and Being Just 57). These complaints include the charge that beauty “distracts attention from wrong social arrangements” and that “when we stare at something…our act is destructive of the object” (On Beauty and Being Just 58). This second complaint often arises in feminist contexts—it famously emerged in Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay ”Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she identifies the oppressive power of “the determining male gaze” (11). Scarry’s concern, however, wasn’t only that beauty was under political fire, although in the second of her two essays she does defend beauty from the political charges she identified. She was also concerned that having been under fire, beauty had receded from view, as Hickey also noticed. Beautiful objects obviously still existed and were still addressed by the humanities, said Scarry, but they weren’t addressed as beautiful: “conversation about the beauty of these things ha[d] been banished” (On Beauty 57). Beauty was spoken of “only in whispers” (On Beauty 57).

An issue that Scarry doesn’t address as a possible cause of beauty’s fall from grace is the way in which a culturally determined standard of beauty can function as a tool of oppression. This issue is linked to the second of the political complaints alluded to by Scarry, that of the harm of the gaze, for the oppressive gaze tends to be directed at certain populations in a way that may be oppressive. But the question about beauty standards is ultimately a different concern; it is the worry that a dominant group determines the standard of beauty then either demands that a less dominant group live up to it (as Naomi Wolf’s The Beauty Myth argues that women are expected to do) or aesthetically devalues certain populations by setting as standard the aesthetic characteristics of the dominant group (characteristics such as white skin). Given this situation, one might certainly be inclined to reject the notion of beauty outright. Yet it is significant that “black is beautiful” became a rallying cry for the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Writing in the seventies, Anderson and Cromwell observe that use of this phrase “reflects the desire for a positive self-concept and self-acceptance for people of African descent in America” (77). The concept of beauty wasn’t itself rejected as oppressive; at issue was who used it and how. Beauty was in fact embraced by many black Americans, who took issue not with beauty tout court but with their exclusion from the category of the beautiful. There is no disputing the fact that beauty as a culturally constructed standard can be used as a tool of oppression. But it’s worth considering the ethical value that may be lost if we turn our backs on the concept altogether rather than doing as the “black is beautiful” supporters have done and are doing:
fighting for an inclusive concept and challenging the role of standards of beauty in a given society.

In the wake of discussions by Hickey and Scarry, several others took up the challenge to reconsider beauty, bringing it back to light. Of note is the anthology *Uncontrollable Beauty* (Beckley 1998), whose contributors work in a wide range of fields, from philosophy to psychology, art criticism to poetry. Also of note is *Beauty Matters* (Brand 2000), which also features multiple contributors and raises, among other issues, many of the sociopolitical questions about beauty. Alexander Nehamas then made beauty the centre of his 2001 Tanner lectures at Yale (later published as *Only a Promise of Happiness* in 2009). Wendy Steiner’s feminist-inflected discussion of beauty in art, *Venus in Exile*, appeared in 2002, and in 2003 Arthur Danto published *The Abuse of Beauty*, which, as we have seen, both addressed the decline in attention to the beautiful and took up a number of beauty-centred issues. This is to name but a few. The conversation, however, is not done. New works on beauty continue to emerge, and seemingly perennial issues continue to be raised, as they remain unresolved. One of these is the relation between beauty and ethics.

Lear is right that not much discussion of beauty’s relation to ethics has taken place in the domain of moral philosophy, at least not in the twentieth century. Iris Murdoch is one of the few relatively contemporary moral philosophers to have addressed it, which she did in the nineteen-sixties, in the midst of beauty’s fall from grace. At that time she was going against the tide. The recent resurgence of interest in beauty has tended to emerge in the context of aesthetics rather than ethics, and not everyone interested in beauty is interested in its connection to ethics.¹ Among Hickey, Scarry, Nehamas and Danto—arguably the four figures most influential in the resurrection of beauty—only Scarry concentrates on beauty in relation to ethics. Nehamas sees no reason to argue for a connection; Danto’s interests in beauty are wide-ranging and do not focus particularly on the relation to ethics, although he does address the connection in a short essay originally published in 1994; and Hickey is more focussed on politics than ethics, though there is overlap between these domains. We can find in aesthetics a healthy discussion of art’s

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¹ I am using the term “ethics” to refer not to a system of moral principles but more broadly, to the realm of life concerned with responding well to others, where “others” may include both the humans and the non-humans that belong to one’s world and make up the situations in which one participates.
relation to ethics, and in environmental ethics a healthy discussion of aesthetic contributions to environmental ethics, but these discussion tend not to focus on beauty specifically.²

In what follows I will bring that focus to bear, and will argue that we can pick out three different ways in which beauty bears on living well with others, depending partly on the account of beauty we take as a starting point. Before saying more about the specifics of this project, however, we might pause to consider why we might care about such connections. Why argue for them, why uncover such relations?

2 Why Care About a Beauty-Ethics Relation?

One reason is that if there is a connection between beauty and living ethically, revealing it reveals part of beauty’s value. Which is to say, it shows us a reason why we might want to cultivate a sense of beauty, why we might want to ensure beauty’s presence in our lives. If Danto and Scarry are right, beauty vanished from philosophical and aesthetic conversations and from much contemporary aesthetic practice at least partly because it seemed ethically problematic. If it turns out to be ethically beneficial, that may be reason to attend to it again, to bring it back into the fold, not just as a matter for discussion but as a value.

We should, however, take a moment to heed Nehamas, who warns against reducing beauty to an ethical tool, seeing it as mere instrument and neglecting its intrinsic value: “the value of beauty lies no further than itself: it is its own reward” (138). It’s true that to see beauty as valuable only because of its ethical usefulness would be a mistake. It may also be an end in itself, as Nehamas argues. Indeed, depending on how it is conceived, beauty can have multiple dimensions and beneficial effects, not all of them necessarily ethical. Beauty, for instance, is often thought of as pleasure-giving, and even if this pleasure does bear on ethics (as we’ll see Iris Murdoch arguing that it does), it can also be a value insofar as pleasure may be part of a good life, apart from the ethical dimension of that life. The pleasure I get from being in the presence of the cherry trees may be a good even apart from its possible influence on my ethical comportment. Seeing that beauty bears on ethical life, however, needn’t mean that I see no other value in it; that is not the

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² See, for instance, Aesthetics and Ethics, ed. Levinson, and The Aesthetics of Natural Environments, eds. Carlson & Berleant.
argument I am advancing. I am not interested in reducing beauty to an ethical instrument, but in showing that some of its value may be ethical.

Insofar as some of beauty’s value may lie in its relation to ethics, part of the value of ethics may also lie in its relation to beauty—if, for instance, we think of beauty as the form of virtue and of virtuous action, as I do in chapter four. In such a case part of the value of virtue or virtuous action is aesthetic. Each domain may support and add to the value of the other. Seeing a relation between beauty and ethics can add to our sense of the value of both domains, giving us more reason to cherish both. It also simply enlarges our understanding of each domain, for we come to know each better when we understand them as related, interpenetrating. We may thus find epistemological as well as ethical value to the unearthing of a relation between beauty and ethics.

Finally, bringing relations between beauty and ethics to light shows us that different facets of our existence are connected. In the effort to bring concentrated attention to ethics or to aesthetics by focusing on them in separation from one another, we may easily overlook their integration in our lives and leave ourselves feeling dis-integrated. I am now wading deeper into the metaphysics of the self than I can properly address here, but let me at least float the proposal that if the self is a multiplicity, it is also a unity, and dis-integration can be a form of suffering. “Dissociation”—the dis-integration of body and mind—is a commonly diagnosed condition that is usually treated as a mental injury, something from which to be healed. The alienation of the labourer from his labour—a form of dis-integration—is decried by Marx as a hardship imposed by capitalism. I suspect that not only does dis-integration of our aesthetic and ethical lives render invisible the ways in which aspects of our being may be interdependent, but we may also suffer from that dis-integration.

3 What Beauty?

In pursuing the thought that there are ways in which beauty and ethical goodness are connected, one immediately comes up against the question of what exactly beauty is. And the answer is not clear. Not only are there many different characterizations and definitions of beauty, but these are often incompatible, contradictory. Take for instance, Schopenhauer’s beauty, which he argued incites contemplation of eternal forms, and contrast it with the Japanese aesthetic of imperfection, which emphasizes the ephemerality of earthly beings (as discussed in Saito 383). Consider the association of beauty with the sacred in the work of Roger Scruton and Slavov
Žižek, and contrast this with the current trend toward approaching beauty as belonging to the everyday, a trend arguably initiated by Katya Mandoki’s *Prosaica* (1994). Then there is the wide gap between two of the most prominent traditions in the philosophy of beauty, traditions whose immense influence can still be felt today. These are the Kantian tradition of the “disinterested” judgement of beauty, which occurs apart from anything one might have at stake in the existence of the beautiful and thus apart from judgements of the good, and the Platonic tradition, which sees beauty as the object of interest, of love, and as deeply related to the good—Diotima, in the *Symposium*, tells us that to love beauty is to want to give birth in beauty and hence become immortal, which is best accomplished by giving birth to virtuous acts (206B-209C). Both traditions are layered in the concept we use today, creating a concept with considerable internal contradiction. The conflict between these traditions is, for instance, related to and possibly the origin of a tension between those who see beauty as primarily formal, i.e. as pertaining exclusively to aspects of appearance and without relation to other considerations, and those who see it as what Marcia Muelder Eaton calls “contextual,” where circumstances beyond appearance (eg. background knowledge and concerns) have an impact on the judgement of beauty (“Kantian and Contextual Beauty”).

Given the high degree of not just difference but contradiction among many of these approaches, it is not obvious that there is a way of reconciling them all. Yet none are completely unfamiliar or outlandish ways of thinking about beauty. Any single account of beauty will thus include in the class of the beautiful beings that according to others should be left out and/or will leave out beings that others plausibly argue should be included. Rather than trying to resolve the contradictions among accounts and making a foolhardy attempt to generate a single account to accommodate everything that has ever been called beautiful, I will be considering beauty from

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3 The question of the degree to which it is correct to interpret Kant as a formalist is currently a matter of some debate, depending partly on what one takes formalism to entail, but it remains the case that historically Kant's view has often been understood to represent a strain of formalism, and this is how Eaton interprets his account of the judgement of beauty in her essay.

4 For the sake of concision, I am using “a being” more widely than may be usual. In this dissertation it may refer to a person, animal, plant or non-living entity, as well as to a place or to some identifiable relational whole such as an ecosystem or city. (Of course, a city itself could be thought of as an ecosystem, but that is a matter for another discussion.)
four different perspectives, from each of which we can see a different kind of relation to ethics unfold.

4 The Current Project

Although I take up different accounts of beauty, my discussion occurs at a relatively general level. By and large I haven’t narrowed the class of beautiful entities so as to focus on either art beauties, artefactual beauties, “natural” beauties or the beauty of humans in particular. Special considerations and issues emerge with regard to different kinds of beautiful entities, but in the current work I am interested in thinking about beauty-ethics relations that apply across different kinds of entities. This is not to say that issues specific to given kinds of beautiful being don’t exist and aren’t important, only that they aren’t my focus here and are worthy of closer consideration than the discussion I can offer in this context. If beauty’s relation to ethics when it comes to particular classes of beautiful being bears consideration, so do the relations that exist across classes, and that is what I offer here.

The next chapter takes the broadest perspective on beauty, has room for beauties both formal and contextual, criterial and non-criterial, symmetrical and asymmetrical, fleeting and timeless. The relation that it sees between beauty and ethics is causal in the sense of motivational: it argues that experience of beauty causes us to move toward ethical responsiveness by “decentring us” such that we are no longer at the centre of our world (“decentring” is Elaine Scarry’s term). Beauty thus acts as a promoter of ethical relation, orienting us such that we are better equipped and more inclined than we might otherwise be to respond well to others. In this chapter I argue that beauty can provide experiences that motivate or help us to build tendencies toward sound ethical response to others. I do so by appealing to arguments by Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch and Elaine Scarry.

The third chapter then focuses on formal beauty in particular. Two special objections to seeing beauty as motivating or catalyzing sound ethical response emerge when this beauty is formal in character. While taking these objections seriously, I will argue that we can still see beauty as related to ethics in the way proposed by the previous chapter.

The fourth chapter then considers beauty as formal in a different way, not as necessarily referring to appearance apart from a being’s other aspects, but as referring to a shape or structure of
relations--of ethical relations in particular. This beauty is thus somewhat abstract, in contrast with the perceptual formal beauties discussed in the previous chapter. Here I am exploring Aristotle’s approach to beauty and ethics in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and argue that we can interpret this text such that the relation between beauty and ethics (ethics qua virtue or virtuous action) is one of formal causation, to use Aristotelian terminology. The argument is that virtue and virtuous action just *are* beautiful, beautiful in structure or shape, i.e. beautiful in form. Beauty thus appears as a “cause” of ethical response in the sense that we aim at beautifully shaped or structured relations when we respond ethically.

The fifth chapter then considers a third type of relation between beauty and ethics: that of analogy. Here I address three different approaches to both beauty and ethics, each of which reveals an analogical relation. The first is Kant’s claim that beauty is a symbol of morality. I do not make an argument for or against the validity of Kant’s claim, but I do endorse the substantial and meaningful role he gives to analogy when it comes to theoretical cognition of moral concepts. I note his claim that abstract ideas need to be grounded—shown to have reality, made theoretically cognizable—through an intuition, and that the abstract ideas that are the basis of moral life can be shown to have reality through the beautiful if we have reason to see the beautiful as analogue of morality. I then turn to Elaine Scarry, who appears to take up the Kantian view that we need to ground abstract moral ideas in intuition. She applies this principle to the relation between beauty and justice (which she takes to be an ethical concept). She sees beauty formally, as characterized by symmetrical appearance, and she presents it as analogically related to a symmetry-based justice. Finding Scarry’s account of beauty narrow and her account of justice restricted, I then propose working with the broader account of beauty developed in the previous chapter. If we take up the approach to beauty that sees it as formal insofar as it refers to relations of a certain shape or structure, and if we then add to this account the common criterion that beauty be perceptual—or at least experienced at first hand—we can see an analogical relation between beauty and an Aristotelian ethic\(^5\) that emphasizes fitting one’s response to the situation at hand. Beauty qua analogy in this sense has the ethical power that Scarry outlines in her account, but it is a broader concept than hers and stands as an analogue of

\(^5\) Again, I note that this is not necessarily an ethic in the sense of a system of principles; I use the term in this case to indicate a way of approaching relations with others.
more complex ethical relations—ones that may include symmetry and asymmetry—than she countenances.

There are, then, at least three discernable relations between beauty and ethics. 1. Experience of formal or contextual beauty may be a catalyst, motivating a move toward ethical response. 2. Beauty formal in a structural sense may be a feature of ethical relation, standing as the form of ethical relation and thus constituting part of what we aim at in aiming at ethical relation. 3. Beauty formal in a structural sense but also perceptual (or necessarily experienced at first hand) can stand as an analogy of good ethical response or ethical position.

I will in a moment situate within an ethical tradition the thinkers on whom I primarily rely, but first a note on beauty and the sublime in relation to the approach I’ve outlined here, for since the 18th century, philosophers and art critics have often contrasted beauty with the sublime. In what follows, however, I tend not to discuss beauty in relation to the sublime. Nor, for that matter, do I discuss beauty in relation to the agreeable as Kant does, or in relation to glamour or kitsch as Kathleen Higgins does. This is because I am not interested in coming up with and defending any particular definition of beauty in contrast with other aesthetic concepts; I am rather interested in seeing what relations to ethics emerge if one allows for different approaches to beauty.

With regard to the sublime, however, the next two chapters, which discuss an attention to the beautiful that moves us toward care for the other, could include the sublime in the category of the beautiful, for it is conceivable that the sublime may decentre us, although the sliver of fear or apprehension that is part of the experience of the sublime has the potential to interfere with the caring attitude I argue that beauty can foster. Chapters four and five, however, focus on the beautiful as the fitting, and this concept of beauty is on the face of it entirely incompatible with the sublime: the sublime is that which exceeds boundaries, and there is a sense in which notions of fit simply do not apply. In this case I do address the sublime insofar as it is related to a Levinasian ethic that stresses the ethical importance of recognizing the Otherness of the Other without “fitting” him into the category of the Same. This Levinasian approach to ethics also takes as ethically crucial the experience of a sense of infinite—sublime—responsibility to the other in the face-to-face encounter. An ethic that emphasizes the role of beauty qua fitting relations can be criticized from this perspective, and in chapter four I engage with that criticism.
5 Beauty’s Relation to Moral Particularism

In the foregoing I have emphasized different accounts of beauty as revealing different possible relations to ethics. What became clear in the course of my research was that although each account of beauty was distinct, they all linked beauty to approaches to ethics that bore characteristics of moral particularism. The thinkers with whom I engage primarily—Weil, Murdoch, Scarry, Aristotle—tend to emphasize the ethical role of attention to particulars. There are exceptions: I discuss Kant, hardly a thorough-going particularist, and Scarry often appeals to principles such as “a standard of care” or the description of justice as based on the principle of the “symmetry of everyone’s relations to each other” (On Beauty and Being Just 66, 93). But I do not in the end rely on Kantian ethics or Scarry’s concept of justice, and I show that even grasping Scarry’s standard of care stems from and depends on attunement to particulars, as she describes it. Given the emphasis on particulars in the ethical approaches I discuss, we might pause initially to situate ourselves vis-à-vis moral particularism.

Jonathan Dancy is the most prominent current proponent of moral particularism. In his landmark book, Ethics Without Principles, he defines moral particularism as the claim that “the possibility of moral thought and judgement does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles” (7). He contrast particularism with generalism, which claims that “the very possibility of moral thought and judgement depends on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles” (EWP 7).

The debate between these two camps, says Dancy, tends to turn on the rights and wrongs of two views about what counts as a reason, views that are not necessarily connected to ethics. The particularists tend to subscribe to holism, which claims that “a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another” (EWP 7). Dancy contrasts holism with atomism, which claims that “a feature that is a reason in one case must remain a reason, and retain the same polarity, in any other” (EWP 7). The debate here is about the relevance of

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6 In “Why Practice Needs Ethical Theory,” however, Martha Nussbaum discusses several ways in which Kant’s ethical thought does exhibit moral-particularist tendencies.

7 Nehamas, for instance, in arguing against Danto, makes a holistic argument for the role of context in determining the status of features as aesthetic (96).
context: can context affect the way in which a feature functions as a reason? Holists say yes, atomists no.

If one is a holist who thinks context is significant to the ethical relevance of features qua reasons, one will be inclined to emphasize the importance of attending to the web of features that belong to or consist of a particular situation rather than application of a general moral principle across situations whose possible variations in feature are understood to be morally irrelevant. One will thus be inclined toward particularism over generalism.

It’s worth noting, however, that Dancy argues that a holist may not be a particularist, for one “can accept the context-sensitivity, the variability, of reasons, but still suppose that there are the sorts of general truths about how reasons behave that might be expressed by moral principles” (EWP 7-8). T. H. Irwin, in discussion of Aristotle, argues similarly that a particularist may accept a role for principles in moral life and a generalist may agree to the indispensability of sensitivity to particulars. He says that the dispute tends to be one about the relative priority of principle and particular: “[a]re the true principles true to the extent that they summarize the particular perceptual judgements of virtuous agents, or are the particular judgements true in so far as they conform to true general principles?” (103).

Although Dancy is the most current proponent of moral particularism, the view he calls particularism can be indeed be traced back to Aristotle. As Ridge and McKeever observe, Aristotle warned against expecting a degree of precision in any theory, including an ethical theory, that is not outstripped by the degree of precision found in its subject matter (628). Irwin, however, argues that although Aristotle has been identified as a particularist by philosophers such as Dancy, John McDowell and Martha Nussbaum, there is no reason to think that he views particular judgements as necessarily prior to principles. That is not a debate I will wade into; I am interested only in the significant role Aristotle gives to particulars in ethical life, not in whether this role amounts to a priority over principles or to an embrace of Dancy’s description of moral particularism.

Dancy’s particularism is rooted in McDowell’s work, according to David Bakhurst, and indeed in one of his early articles on particularism, Dancy cites McDowell as a precedent (Bakhurst 160-2; Dancy “Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties” 530). McDowell, in turn, has some debt to Iris Murdoch: in “Virtue and Reason” he cites The Sovereignty of the Good
three times, once as a source for the paragraph in which he discusses “stress on appreciation of the particular” and argues that “we can equate the conceptual equipment which forms the framework of anything recognizable as a moral outlook with a capacity to be impressed by certain aspects of reality” (347). Murdoch, as we will see, does indeed stress appreciation of the particular in her account of ethical life: “by the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act” (SG 65). It is attention to the character of a particular situation rather than an appeal to one or more principles that shapes my response to the situation: “The idea of a patient, loving regard directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like ‘obedience’” (SG 39). I obey the dictates of the situation I perceive. Murdoch thus steers away from emphasis on conscious, rational ethical deliberation: “On the view which I suggest, which connects morality with attention to individuals, human individuals or individual realities of other kinds, the struggle and the progress is something more obscure, more historically conditioned, and usually less clearly conscious” (SG 36-7). Here we don’t have a picture of conformation to judicious principles but of attention-based responsiveness to individuals. Indeed, Murdoch qualifies as a full-blown particularist on Dancy’s account of particularism, for elsewhere she argues explicitly for the position that there are “positive and radical moral conceptions which are unconnected with the view that morality is essentially universal rules. I have in mind moral attitudes which emphasize the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations ‘taped,’ the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique” (“MV” 46).

If Murdoch planted one of the seeds of McDowell’s cognitivist arguments, she herself draws on the thinking of Simone Weil, who claims that those in need “have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention” (WG 64). (This claim may sound naïve, but in our discussion of Weil in the following chapter, we’ll see that for her, attention is more than the simple act of turning one’s eyes and ears toward a person, and the giving of one’s attention is an act capable of accomplishing more ethical work that it may at first appear.) Elsewhere Weil writes, “[t]he poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself” (G&G 119). Attention to
particulars is all that is required for moral life; there is no need for principles. Although her work tends to be aphoristic rather than consisting of a sustained argument, Weil’s position looks very close to Dancy’s in its refusal of the necessity of anything but attention to particular beings.

I mention these connections from the current debate to earlier figures because I discuss and draw on the work of these earlier figures. These are the same thinkers who present beauty and ethics as related, and their discussions of ethics in the context of this relation show the particularist tendencies that eventually led to Dancy’s current arguments and the on-going debate about the merits of moral particularism.

A noticeable feature of Dancy’s characterization of particularism in *Ethics Without Principles* is that it is cast in the negative. Particularism is defined in terms of what it’s against, i.e. the necessity of moral principles. The definition says nothing substantial about what a particularist is *for* or what she takes moral practice to consist of. Ridge and McKeever likewise suggest that particularism is best viewed as a family of related views, united in that they all take some kind of negative attitude toward moral principles (628). Interestingly, Dancy tells us that he could have written a different book from this one, one that would have investigated the unique complexities of actual moral situations in order to show the inadequacy of moral principles:

> The book I have not written would really be an investigation of the subtleties of our moral thought and the actual complexities of life. The book I have written is about how to understand the way in which reasons work, and deals largely with *theories* about reasons rather than with life. As you can see, I would like to have been able to write the other book, the one about life, but this one is all I could manage (*EWP* 2).

Even in the unwritten book, however, the focus of the argument remains the moral principle rather than the particular: the hypothetical appeal to the particularities of lived life is presented as a demonstration of the principle’s inadequacy rather than as a revelation of what a particularist approach offers moral life.

Because of the incompleteness of Dancy’s definition of particularism, we might want to take up the account provided by David Bakhurst, who tells us that particularism is, broadly speaking, a view that “the structure of moral reality is not best captured by systems of moral principles; moral judgement involves a sensitivity to context which outruns anything moral rules can
establish” (157). He at least gestures toward the emphasis on “sensitivity to context” that characterizes particularist views, making an effort to provide some positive content. But he does not perform the demonstration of the outrunning of moral rules that Dancy required. It’s worth noting, however, that Murdoch effectively denies the need for such a demonstration. She presents the possibility that a story that one tells oneself and which may issue in a practical directive may be either “elaborately personal” or include “the conception that the individual is unique” (“MV” 46). But she doesn’t then argue, as one might expect, that morality in such cases can’t be reduced to a universal principle. She rather questions the value of such a reduction:

Let us pause and consider what after all a philosophical model is for. If we give in here and agree that somebody whose belief and moral inspiration was of the kind mentioned above would of course, when he acts, wish others so placed to act as he does, what does it profit us? We have won a similarity, but we have lost a much more important and interesting difference. There are people whose fundamental moral belief is that we all live in the same empirical and rationally comprehensible world and that morality is the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct. There are other people whose fundamental belief is that we live in a world whose mystery transcends us and that morality is the exploration of that mystery in so far as it concerns each individual. It is only by sharpening the universality model to a point of extreme abstraction that it can be made to cover both views (“MV” 47).

Objections to moral particularism have multiplied in recent years; it is a hot debate. Ridge and McKeever identify attacks on the validity of the principle of holism, on the analogy philosophers such as McDowell see between moral knowledge and perceptual knowledge, and on the particularist claim that following principles leads to rigidity and narrow-mindedness (a claim made by David McNaughton in Moral Vision) (158). They also observe that many efforts have been made lately to steer a middle ground between particularism and generalism by “agree[ing] that there are law-like generalizations governing features that have moral significance whilst insisting that such generalizations are exception laden, and ineliminably so” (637). Our current inquiry, however, does not require us to wade into the debate and either take up a fully particularist stance or attempt to find a middle route. In order allow that beauty can be morally relevant in the ways I will be describing, any view that accepts a role for context-
sensitivity and attunement to particulars will suffice, even one that also sees a significant or even dominant role for principles.

I have said that I will argue for the existence of at least three forms of relation between beauty and ethics when that ethic has a particularist slant as it does in the work of Aristotle, Weil and Murdoch as well as in the Murdoch-inspired argument Scarry presents. Even if not all of these thinkers argue directly against a need for principles, and even if they are not explicitly holistic in their thought, they nevertheless stress the need for attention to particulars and to the configurations of particular situations, and they emphasize the ethical role of an agent’s sensitivity to the particulars in her midst. In each case, we find a role for beauty emerging in the context of this engagement with particulars. Readers may now be wondering why it might be that the philosophers who argue for a connection between beauty and ethics seem to have at least particularist leanings. This is an interesting question, one to keep in mind as I discuss the three kinds of relation of beauty to ethics that we may discern. I will first show that such relations exist and will then consider why these relations seem to emerge in connection with ethics with a particularist dimension, but I invite readers to read on with that question in view.
Chapter 2
Experience of Beauty and Decentred Attention

1 Introduction

One of the ways in which beauty and ethics are often thought to be related is through a causal relation, a movement from beauty to ethics. The most common version of this thought says that experiencing beauty makes you somehow a better person or incites you to act well. Some such relation is proposed by Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch and Elaine Scarry among others, and it emerges in works as early as Plato’s *Symposium*. There Diotima tells us that to love beauty is to want to give birth in beauty and hence become immortal, which is best accomplished by giving birth to virtuous acts (206B-209C).

In a canvas of theories that put beauty before ethics, Marcia Muelder Eaton expresses sympathy with what she calls theories of “psychological or behavioural causal priority,” but she ultimately adopts a different view, one that she finds to be “closer to the truth” and more enriching (“Aesthetics: the Mother of Ethics?” 361). Regardless of the view she chooses to endorse, we may ask why she turns away from a behavioural causal account, one with which she has sympathy, one that seems to strike some kind of chord. The most obvious problem with such causal accounts of the relation of beauty to ethics is that counter-examples are so obvious and so many. As Alexander Nehamas says, “beautiful villains, graceful outlaws, tasteful criminals, and elegant torturers are everywhere about us” (127). How can we claim that the experience of beauty makes us better people when we know of music-loving Nazis? This is one of the most extreme counter-examples, but everyday instances abound: I am envious of a friend’s beautiful apartment; I am greedy for a beautiful cookware in a shop window despite owning a beautiful set already; I take an objectifying attitude toward the beautiful barista. In none of these instances does the experience of beauty appear to bring out the best in me; in some of them beauty even seems to bring out my shadow side. So why do intelligent people continue to describe experiences of beauty as moving us in the direction of ethics? Why does Eaton sympathize with this view even as she turns away from it?
One could speculate that beauty-lovers want to justify their love by drawing on the weight of ethics. But this presumes small-mindedness on the part of the beauty-lovers, and there is another explanation. I propose that the line of thought that sees beauty as moving us toward ethical living persists because it originates in a real phenomenon. The experience of beauty can and does make us better people—it just doesn’t do it all the time. I will be arguing that although the causal connection of beauty to ethics is not necessary, it may nevertheless obtain and can be significant. In what way it is significant I will demonstrate in what follows, focussing on Murdoch’s concept of ‘unselfing’ before the beautiful, or what Scarry calls ‘decentring.’ I will go into these concepts in more detail later, but both point toward an ethics in which one moves away from concern with the self and toward concern for the other.

In discussing beauty’s contribution to or promotion of such other-directed concern, I will also address three objections to seeing beauty as promoting ethical attitudes and responses. I will examine E. B. Elliot’s objection that attention to the beautiful can be a form of intrusion. I will also consider the issue of what Scarry calls “lateral disregard” whereby less beautiful beings are neglected in favour of the beautiful (65). Finally I will discuss the major stumbling block posed by the multitude of counter-examples to claims that beauty promotes ethically sound relations, for these counter-examples collectively wield significant power.

In the course of my discussion I will be asking readers to recall or imagine an experience of beauty, and although in other chapters I will be discussing beauty as either formal or contextual, criterial or without criteria, the link to ethics discussed here is relevant to all these versions of beauty, so I am not restricting discussion to any one of them. ‘Beauty’ is, after all, a famously protean term—every plausible specification of what counts as ‘beautiful’ leaves out some instances that belong on other plausible specifications—and this discussion does not require a narrowing of the class of the beautiful. I don’t wish to unduly outlaw instances that may occur to readers as moments in which they have experienced beauty. It is, however, worthy of note that formal beauty, i.e. beauty that pertains exclusively to a being’s appearance apart from its other aspects and circumstances, is often one of the most suspect when it comes to claiming a relation to ethics. And although purely formal beauty does present us with ethically troublesome

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8 Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Scarry’s work in this chapter will refer to On Beauty and Being Just.
possibilities, which we will discuss in the next chapter, it is nevertheless capable of fostering the
decentred attention discussed here. Even formal beauty can steer us in the direction of ethics in
the way this chapter outlines.

2  Decentred Attention

As I have said, in this chapter I will be focussed on the claim that experience of beauty can elicit
a kind of attention that is ‘decentred.’ Experience of beauty is not the only experience capable of
decentring us—the perception of another’s vulnerability or injury, for instance, may also be
decentring. But experience of beauty is nevertheless one kind of experience that may involve
our being decentred. In section six of this chapter we will explore both what might make the
experience of being decentred by beauty unique and the ethical value of the experience
regardless of its possibly unique character, but first we must take a closer look at what decentring
is and how beauty may accomplish it.

The term ‘decentring’ is Scarry’s, but versions of this claim show up in Weil and Murdoch, on
both of whom Scarry relies. A version of this concept appears first in Weil, who describes a
moment in which one feels love for the world’s beauty as a moment of transformation in which
we “give up our imaginary position as the centre” (WG 100). In such a moment, we “discern that
all points in the world are equally centres” (WG 100).

Attention is at the heart of Weil’s ethics: “Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in
this world but people capable of giving them their attention” (WG 64). ‘Unhappy’ in Weil’s
sense doesn’t refer to trivial or fleeting unhappiness, the unhappiness caused by a rainy day or a
missed bus; she means the unhappiness of those who are in serious need, society’s destitute. The
hungry woman asking for change. But if we’re thinking about something as serious as hunger,
mere attention might not seem to be what’s called for—what the woman needs is a ham
sandwich or a job, not a gaze. This will seem particularly true if we think of attention as
divorced from action or imagine the distanced “appreciative” attention fostered by both 18th-
century aesthetics and modern science, but neither approach gets at what Weil means by
‘attention.’ For Weil, when one attends, “the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order
to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (WG 63). She’s
talking about attention as a displacement of concern with the self in favour of concern for the
other. This concern she takes to engage one in seeing to the needs of the being that confronts
one; appropriate care will unfold from the attentive act of perception: “The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself” (G&G 119). One would not be far wrong in thinking of a Levinasian encounter with the Face of the Other, in which the Other’s vulnerability (his “dénûment”) is revealed, compelling me to infinite ethical responsibility to him (TI 75). Weil, however, thinks of attention as a skill one can exercise voluntarily, not just a response to the phenomenologically compelling presence of an Other; indeed, she recommends academic work for its role in developing a capacity for attention that she takes to bear on moral life (WG 64-5). She also sees the experience of beauty in which “the soul empties itself,” i.e. is decentered, as preparing me for the exercise of this attention in the encounter with those whom she calls “unhappy.”

This emptying of the soul in the presence of beauty may call to mind Schopenhauer’s account of the experience of beauty. He too sees beauty as instigating a form of self-forgetfulness, one in which “the whole consciousness is filled and occupied with a single sensuous image” (231). On his account beautiful nature or beautiful art, by filling the consciousness, can create a moment in which “the attention is no longer directed to the motives of willing but comprehends things free from their relation to the will, and thus…gives itself entirely up to them, so far as they are ideas, but not in so far as they are motives” (254).

Although Schopenhauer, like Weil, focusses on beauty as fostering ego-less attention, these last two clauses suggest one of the differences between him and the likes of Weil. Schopenhauer sees the beautiful as leading us into contemplation of Platonic ideas and toward a form of pure knowledge. What I am engaged with in such a moment is no longer the particular being before me but its eternal form: “if thus the object has to such an extent passed out of all relation to something outside it, and the subject out of all relation to the will, then that which is so known is no longer the particular thing as such, but it is the Idea, the eternal form” (231). One sees the object of one’s attention as withdrawn or abstracted from its nexus of relations, and in such a situation—or rather lack of situation—one can hardly be seen to bear any ethical responsibility to it, for ethical responsibility implies relation. One is thus absented from the frustrations and complexities of life as a particular temporal being among other particular temporal beings: “he who is sunk in this perception is no longer individual…but he is pure, will-less painless timeless subject of knowledge” (231, italics his). The occupation of one’s attention by the beautiful is
valuable for Schopenhauer not because it has any ethical import but because through this occupation we enter “the painless state which Epicurus prized as the highest good and as the state of the gods; for we are for the moment set free from the miserable striving of the will…the wheel of Ixion stands still” (254). The moment of self-forgetting, pure contemplation is a moment of blessed peace.

This movement toward contemplation of the eternal is the opposite of the movement Weil describes. Though she too describes a moment in which “the whole consciousness is filled and occupied” by the beautiful, this occupation doesn’t lead her to contemplation of eternal forms but rather to caring regard for the particular being before her (Schopenhauer 231). Beauty doesn’t provide an escape from the complications of the felt need to respond to particular beings but sharpens that need. It isn’t a way out of engagement as a particular being among particular beings but a way into such engagement. It leads to ethics rather than to pure knowledge.

Iris Murdoch was a reader of Weil, and the concept of decentring also appears in her ethics. She borrows from Weil the emphasis upon a certain kind of attention as crucial to ethics: “by the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act” (SG 65). Murdoch claims that we are selfish by default—a perennial view of human nature, one that goes back to Hobbes and finds a current defender in David Gauthier. Murdoch’s argument, however, is that there are certain experiences whereby we may be lifted out of ourselves, undergo “unseling” (SG 82). The experience of beauty is one of those moments of unseling, she says, and she describes such a transformation:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other thing, it seems less important (SG 82).

Without necessarily taking on the claim that we are programmed to be selfish, we may nevertheless agree that there are moments in which we tend toward needless selfishness, and that if beauty helps us out of some of those moments, it helps us to be better people by orienting us away from an exclusive concern with our own interests, reminding us of the larger world.
Scarry’s account of decentring is lifted from Murdoch’s work, and although I will be discussing a way in which their respective accounts differ when it comes to how beauty’s decentring effect bears on our moral life, the concept of beauty as a decentring force is not significantly different in Scarry than in Murdoch. Why, then, choose Scarry’s term, “decentred,” rather than Murdoch’s original term, “unselfed?” Or why not use the term more commonly associated with beauty, ‘disinterested,’ a term even older than Murdoch’s?

‘Decentred,’ like ‘unselfed,’ is indeed related to the traditional—though not the Kantian⁹—meaning of ‘disinterested’ as ‘without self-interest.’ In the 18th century, one making an aesthetic judgement was thought to take up such an attitude. But we should note that I actively take up the disinterested attitude; I am not made disinterested. By contrast, I can be passively decentred or unselfed. This is more often than not my experience of the encounter with beauty; my decentring is not willed. This passivity is significant, as we shall see, and it is one of the reasons that I am using ‘decentred’ rather than ‘disinterested.’

‘Decentred,’ furthermore, is a more flexible term than ‘disinterested’ or ‘unselfed.’ To be decentred doesn’t necessarily mean to have no self-interest whatsoever; it simply means that those interests are not central. When I am decentred, I become, as Scarry says, “adjacent” (113). The term ‘decentred’ allows that self is not necessarily left entirely out of the picture when it comes to ethical consideration and care. ‘Decentred’ implies less self-sacrifice than does ‘unselfed.’ Of course, the ‘self’ is a contested concept in the post-modern era, yet for all its fluidity and multiplicity, I hold onto it as describing an entity with needs and interests that require consideration, and it is in this spirit that I take up the term ‘decentred.’

My concern about undue self-sacrifice doesn’t appear to trouble Weil, whose thought more often than not leans toward recommendation of the self-sacrificial. Nor does it seem to have occurred to Murdoch, who was primarily focussed on the movement away from what she took to be endemic selfishness. Neither does Scarry mention a need to care for the self. But adding this

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⁹ Kant’s version of disinterestedness famously excludes not only self-interest but also any interest “in the existence of the thing” (5:203). Care for the object of attention as being in some way worthy of consideration qua ontological is not possible in one who takes up this attitude in judgements of beauty. This somewhat peculiar version of disinterestedness is thus quite different from de-centred attention, which is deeply related to care for the being to which/whom one attends.
element doesn’t significantly change the picture they collectively present of beauty’s link to ethics: beauty can still be seen to work against undue selfishness (as opposed to due selfishness) and toward concern for the world without. It can still be understood to open me up to the other. Allowing the self to remain worthy of ethical consideration just has a moderating effect, means that care for others needn’t entirely blind me to my own needs and desires.

Seeing the self as deserving at least some ethical regard might, however, bring a worry to bear on the picture of decentring drawn by Scarry et al. One might worry that a powerful experience of beauty could push me into undue self-sacrifice. But this would be a largely unnecessary worry. Murdoch observes that “[i]t is so patently a good thing to take delight in flowers and animals that people who bring home potted plants and watch kestrels might be surprised at the notion that these have anything to do with virtue” (SG 83). Likewise, Scarry says of beauty that “it permits us to be adjacent while also permitting us to experience acute pleasure” (114). To speak of such an experience of pleasure as one of self-sacrifice is to misunderstand the experience. Undue self-sacrifice is a danger only to the degree that any significant phenomenological orientation toward the other can put one in danger of such sacrifice. If there is such a danger, any orientation toward the needs and interests of others is its source. But this risk is minimal; the unduly self-sacrificial response speaks of pathology. A more or less healthy person is more or less capable of grasping the moral considerability of the needs, interests and desires of both self and other. For such a person, the experience of beauty may be a phenomenological reminder of their place in the world, adjacent to its other aspects.

3 Intrusion

The work of negotiating the needs and interests of self and other bears on another possible problem with the account of beauty as ethically valuable because of its capacity to move a person in the direction of decentred attention. Weil, Murdoch and Scarry all assume that the attention they describe is beneficial. But what if it isn’t? Later I will address the problem of ethically poor forms of attention—such as envious, greedy or inappropriately reificatory attentions—as distinct from decentred attention. But what if any form of attention, including decentred attention, may be harmful? I have in mind the problem of intrusion, which is raised by Elliott. The problem of unwelcome attention. It is an issue I will consider as pertaining to the case of beautiful people and perhaps to that of animals, for most metaphysical pictures of the world
don’t allow for the possibility of intruding on a plant, a rock or an artwork, for these are not usually thought of as being able to welcome or to discourage attention, nor as being harmed by the directing of my attention toward them, and a defense of an alternative metaphysical worldview is far beyond the scope of the current work.

Elliott argues against Scarry, and the view she attacks is one that claims that experience of beauty is necessary to ethical conduct. If this is the case, says Elliott, that state of affairs would justify intruding on bodies perceived to be beautiful “in the absence of reciprocal benefit or permission” (179). This in “a world in which the abilities of some types of bodies to negotiate and determine their own boundaries is at best uncertain, and in some instances, flatly denied” (179).

Elliott is right about the character of the world, at least the one I live in, but her logic is shaky. If beauty were necessary to ethics, that would still not make it necessary for me to intrude on every beautiful body I came across, to gaze when gazing is not welcome, to behold when the beheld would rather be left alone. In seeking to become ethically good, I could easily confine myself to experiences of beautiful bodies that allow or even welcome my attention and leave alone those who wish to be left alone. Even in the unlikely case that I never encountered a beautiful person who allowed me to attend to them, there would remain open to me beautiful flowers and waters, trees and skies, songs and buildings.

With regard to my own argument, I will not be claiming that experiences of beauty are necessary to ethics, only that they sometimes help us to become ethically responsive. So Elliott’s concern that linking attention-to-beauty with ethics would mean that beholding beautiful bodies would be compulsory, even without consent from those bodies, is even less troubling, hinging as it does on the necessity of the experience of beauty to ethical development.

But the matter of intrusion is a serious ethical issue when it comes to attention paid to beauty, and Elliott is right to draw attention to it. Scarry characterizes beauty as a mutual “welcoming” of perceiver and perceived, where to welcome is to “come in accordance with the other’s will” (90). But is it always the case that a person experienced as beautiful welcomes or in any sense “wills” the attention directed toward them? Surely not. Even when attention is courteous and well-intentioned, “generous” as Scarry says, there are times when most of us just want to be left alone, unscrutinized by even the friendliest of attentions (58). Unwanted attention is an issue in
the lives of many women, for women’s bodies tend to be among those whose ability “to negotiate and determine their own boundaries is at best uncertain, and in some instances, flatly denied,” as Elliott says (179).

Elliott’s complaint about intrusion is a form of the argument Scarry describes as claiming that “when we stare at something beautiful, make it an object of sustained regard, our act is destructive to the object” (58). The very term Scarry uses, “object,” suggests a problem: a beautiful subject is often treated as object. But even when a subject is regarded as subject, attention may yet be unwelcome. It is then destructive in the way Elliott indicates: by depriving bodies of the ability to negotiate and determine their own boundaries. Even one who offers decentred, other-focussed attention could conceivably be guilty of this form of ethical mistreatment.

Scarry suggests that concern about the gaze as harmful is cancelled out by the common concern that beauty can distract us from sites we should be attending to (an issue I will discuss fully in the next section). But it’s not obvious that such cancellation is necessary or even possible. To begin with, Scarry’s argument hinges on accepting an unnecessarily strong form of the two premises underlying each argument respectively, one premise proposing that attention is always good (and therefore to deprive beings of attention is bad) and the other that attention is always bad (and therefore the beautiful suffers from being attended to). These views, says Scarry, “will together eliminate both grounds of opposition” (59-60). But this would be the case only if the two views could co-exist, which logically they can’t—they contradict one another. Scarry is closer to the mark when she notes this contradiction, arguing that the two views “are unlikely both to be true since they fundamentally contradict each other” (58). This is true, and different from the claim that they cancel each other out; it in fact renders their mutual cancellation logically impossible. If they can’t coexist, they can’t cancel one another out.

Scarry is wrong, in any case, to address only the strong versions of the respective claims about attention that underlie each argument. Scarry assumes an all-or-nothing attitude whereby attention is thought to be good on the distraction argument and bad on the harmful gaze argument. But the effect and value of attention may differ depending on the site. Attention may be helpful in one site and harmful in another, depending on the circumstances. Helen might want
to be left alone, while John might desperately want attention. So even if we allow that a beautiful being (Helen) could distract me from a site in need of attention (John), the beautiful being (Helen) could yet be the recipient of unwanted attention. My attentional behaviour could be misguided in two different ways simultaneously: I could both deprive one being of attention and impose attention upon another. Neither a worry about distraction nor a worry about unwanted attention necessarily assumes that attention is always good or always harmful, so the two concerns may coexist, contrary to Scarry’s claim. This means that hearkening to beauty as distraction from matters that require attention doesn’t help when it comes to addressing the problem of intrusive attention.  

I have said that Elliott is wise to point out the possibility of intrusive attention. She is wise to do so because awareness of the possibility of intrusion alerts us to the need to proceed with respectful care and caution when it comes to attending to the beautiful. We must be alert to signs that attention is unwelcome, even if the attention is offered respectfully and caringly. Part of the work of attending respectfully and caringly, after all, is precisely to notice signs that attention is unwanted and to act accordingly. Ironically, to attend respectfully can be to turn away. But it is only by attending decentredly in the first place that the appropriateness of turning away becomes apparent, so decentred attention—i.e. other-centred attention—remains ethically valuable for the role it plays in allowing us to discern the needs of the other, insofar as such discernment is

10 While it’s true that Scarry is wrong about the two arguments cancelling each other out, Dennis Dutton appears to wilfully misunderstand her point in his scathing review. He writes, “Apparently, if a beautiful object is politically incorrect, it would be the welcome thing to subject it to a reifying gaze. And if our gaze were directed at a social arrangement that needed improvement, that would be okay, since its cold, reifying stare is just what wrong social arrangements deserve.” Scarry, however, is not addressing the point that beauty may be politically incorrect but rather the point that it may distract from politics, so Dutton doesn’t have her view quite right. More significantly, Dutton is right that Scarry missteps in speaking of mutual cancellation, for I have argued that she makes the mistake of assuming that the two opposing premises about attention can coexist and hence cancel each other out. But her point is obviously not that one approach rights a wrong that is committed following the other approach. The valid point she makes is that it is logically incoherent to believe attention to be both essentially good and essentially bad, and that in this way the belief underpinning one argument nullifies the other and vice versa. One doesn’t have to dig deep to unearth this claim, and Dutton presumably had the resources if he were at all inclined to engage with Scarry in a constructive way.

11 This statement may raise questions for readers about the order of the relation between attending and being decentred. Some may be wondering if beauty causes us to be decentred only if we are already attending to it, attending to its call to attend. The decentred response elicited by beauty may thus look redundant. I ask readers to hold onto this question for now, and I will address it in section five, where I will identify two distinct moments in the bringing of one’s attention to the beautiful.
possible. The need for such sensitivity pertains to all forms of engagement with other beings: insofar as it’s possible, one must constantly take care that one’s engagement is apt, and the exercise of such care involves decentred attention.

The vigilance I have prescribed may not, however, always seem to be possible in the case of the beautiful, and intrusion might thus seem a particularly troubling possibility in such cases. For the experience of beauty is often described as something that is undergone, an experience in which the beholder is relatively passive. Consider the travails of the helpless beholder in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, who “shudders” and feels fear, whose “whole soul seethes and throbs,” who experiences a kind of madness, falling into “anguish and helpless raving” (251C, 251D). Or consider Alexander Nehamas’ account of an inclination to stare at the beautiful and which he finds “almost impossible to resist” (53). Murdoch’s description of being caught up by the kestrel likewise depicts a relatively passive experience, and I myself have described the decentring accomplished by the beautiful as something that is undergone more than willed. Under such circumstances, how much control can a person be reasonably expected to exert over her exposure of the beautiful to her attention?

A great deal. And we do: most of us are most of the time able to direct our attention elsewhere, away from the beautiful, if the situation suggests that attention may be inappropriate or if the beautiful person is obviously uncomfortable. And although I will argue that beauty does not always promote decentred attention, when it does, it moves us in the direction of turning away if turning away is called for. There is little danger of genuinely other-centred attention being intrusive. If it is initially intrusive, it’s unlikely to be so for long. To be caringly attentive to an other is to be sensitive to his circumstances and to his state of being such that one both senses and responds appropriately to him. To be passively decentred such that the other is the centre of my attention does not necessarily mean to be a passive gazer, trapped in star-struck perception of the other; it is rather to passively cede my place at the centre. And to do so may include responding to the other’s needs and desires by turning away. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how those needs and desires may be discerned if not through caring, respectful attention.

Although decentred attention is unlikely to be intrusive, it remains that we do not always respond to beauty in a decentred way. There are many counter-examples that suggest that other, less ethically desirable forms of attention are possible, and I will investigate these in a moment. If
we take as given that these alternative responses are possible, it’s also possible that there are forms of attention that will not tend to steer us away from intrusion—that will, indeed, lead to extreme forms of intrusion such as seeking ownership, as in the phenomenon of the “trophy wife,” to which Elliott points (177 n. 10). The movement from beauty to ethically sound forms of engagement doesn’t happen in every situation, and there are situations in which the beautiful may be harmed by certain kinds of attention. My claim here is only that decentred attention is not one of these; that it is rather a condition for further ethically sound response; and that beauty can at least sometimes promote our taking up this form of attention.

4 Beauty’s Broader Ethical Influence

Having discussed similar accounts of a relation between beauty and decentred attention in Weil, Murdoch and Scarry, we may now note some differences in these accounts. Although all three portray beauty as calling us to turn our attention to it and away from ourselves to a significant degree, Murdoch also focuses on the moment immediately after the encounter with the kestrel, “when I return to the other thing.” I emerge in the wake of the encounter refreshed, clarified, beauty having done the work of “clearing [my mind] of selfish care” (SG 82). I am not only decentred in the moment of my attention to the beautiful, but I remain so oriented as I take up my other affairs. The beautiful being does not only direct me to its presence in the moment but also directs me away from myself in the moments after it passes. Though it’s not clear how long this state lasts, it refreshes my attention, pulls me out of the vortex of selfish concerns that Murdoch assumes us to inhabit more often than not.

This gesture toward the extension of decentred attention beyond the encounter with the beautiful is important, because the experience of beauty is of minimal ethical value if it decentres us in the moment but has no effect that carries over into other encounters. If its effect were confined to the encounter with the beautiful, the experience could have the ethical benefit of helping us to enter into ethical relationship with the beautiful then and there, could encourage us to place the beautiful being and its needs and desires at the centre of our world rather than ourselves, but although this experience would be of some value, its impact would be limited, extending no further. Beauty’s sphere of influence would be restricted to soliciting attention for itself; it could even monopolize our attention, drawing attention away from other attention-worthy beings. In such a situation one might be in danger of approaching the realm of the morally
underdeveloped aesthete, concerned with nothing but the world of beauty. Although such a person could conceivably be centred with regard to the beautiful, the beautiful would be the limit of her concern.\footnote{Another version of the aesthete is more extreme: someone who immerses himself in a being’s beauty to the exclusion of any kind of ethical concern—here we might think of Kierkegaard’s aesthete in \textit{Either/Or}, a character entirely immersed in subjective pleasures and thrills. I will, however, delay discussion of this aesthete till the next chapter, which focusses on formal beauty, for this version of the aesthete emerges most clearly when we consider beauty as pertaining exclusively to appearance divorced from a being’s other aspects and circumstances. There we will examine Dave Hickey’s argument that there may be, paradoxically, ethical value in taking up an aesthetic attitude in which one attends exclusively to beauty without attending to ethical matters.} The centre of her universe would be the beautiful and the beautiful only; even if she saw \textit{herself} as adjacent to the beautiful, other beings would remain peripheral. Even for those whose characters might not be primarily defined by such narrow concerns and morally impoverished attitudes, there exists the possibility of moments in which beauty draws one away from attending to that which may be less than beautiful but equally attention-worthy if not more so. The problem is obvious in ecological ethics: it’s easy to attend to and care for the beautiful endangered snow leopard or the Magellanic penguins with their graceful black-and-white markings, but it may be less easy to summon the urge to attend to and care for a not-obviously beautiful marsh, perhaps one in danger of being drained.

Marcia Muelder Eaton, however, defends the ethical value of aesthetic approaches to the environment from objections based on phenomena such as the neglected marsh. She argues that “factors in themselves not aesthetically valuable are connected to the perceived intrinsic properties [for Eaton, aesthetic properties] that members of a community consider worthy of attention and reflection” (“The Beauty That Requires Health” 101).\footnote{A similar line of thought was first developed by Allen Carson in “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” a debt Eaton acknowledges.} On her view, learning about the marsh—perhaps about its role in the ecology to which it belongs and the variety of life forms it contains—may foster a sense of its beauty, spurring us to appreciation of aesthetic features previously overlooked. The possibility then exists that this fresh sense of the marsh’s beauty will lead to a desire to attend to and care for it further. But what if the marsh isn’t healthy, isn’t contributing to its ecology, isn’t full of life, and therefore isn’t perceived to be beautiful? We could extend Eaton’s argument and suggest that perceiving a deficit of health and beauty depends on gaining a sense of what health and beauty would be, and thus gives us...
something to work toward. We might imagine a healthy, thriving version of the marsh, whose image could inspire us to attend to and care for the marsh as potentially beautiful.

But Eaton’s argument is not one for beauty’s leading to ethical response, as mine is. She is only concerned to show that aesthetic appreciation and ethics are compatible. Her argument depends on our having an ethical concern for the marsh to begin with, or at least some impetus toward attending to it such that its beauty may be discovered. The resulting perception of the marsh’s beauty then draws us to attend further, which is of ethical value. The better we attend, the better able we are to respond appropriately. But on Eaton’s picture beauty doesn’t foster the initial movement toward decentred attention that Murdoch describes. A sense of beauty kicks in after careful attention has already been paid; it is more conclusion to or midpoint of one’s ethical engagement than it is a beginning. So what can Murdoch et al. say when it comes to the problem of the marsh, the problem of neglecting the not-obviously beautiful or perhaps downright ugly?

We have already seen that Murdoch describes beauty as having an impact on me that changes the way “I return to thinking of the other thing,” but we aren’t concerned only with her response to what occupies her immediately after the experience of the kestrel. What about beauty’s longer-term impact on my ethical responsiveness? Murdoch, as we have seen, emphasizes the role of long-standing background attitudes to any given choice: “by the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act” (65). Her claim is that the experience of beauty helps to build habits of attention that work against “the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images” (65). The experience of beauty is a learning experience. As pleasurable, it is “the most accessible” (though not necessarily the most important) site of moral change (83). According to Murdoch, such experiences are part of my education toward becoming a less self-centred, more other-focussed person in general.

Weil, for her part, argues that attention in the sense in which she means it, as an emptying of the self, is a skill. As such it can be developed through practice, and it then operates across various aspects of our lives, from academics to the encounter with one’s neighbour: “so it comes about that, paradoxical though it may seem, a Latin prose or a geometry problem...[s]hould the occasion arise, can one day make us better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him” (63). Practising the art of attention in one context helps us to develop a
capacity to attend in another. On this line of thinking, the experience of beauty contributes to the development of our general ability to offer decentred attention.

Murdoch also points to the possibility of deliberate cultivation of the attention discovered through the experience of beauty. She says that although in the example of the kestrel she is lifted out of herself without volition, “of course this is also something that we may do deliberately” (82). The kestrel makes us a gift of an experience that we can also put effort into creating. Having been effortlessly unselfed by such a creature, we can then practice voluntary attention to other beings. Elaine Scarry picks up this line of thought, claiming that in the case of two vases, one of which is strikingly beautiful the other less so, “the extraordinary vase involuntarily introduces me to the recognition that vases are fragile, and I then voluntarily extended the consequences of that recognition to other objects in the same category” (67, italics hers). Beauty introduces me to a “standard of care” that I then carry into other situations (66).

Scarry’s argument goes even further than this, however—certainly further than Murdoch’s does. She claims not only that beauty introduces me to a standard of care that I can voluntarily bring to bear elsewhere, but also that it exerts a “pressure toward the distributional” (67). Beauty presses me to extend that standard laterally. Scarry, however, does little to explain how or why this pressure comes about. In her phenomenological description, the pressure depends on a four-step process: having felt the fragile beauty of the first vase exhort care from me (1), I learn “a standard of care” (2), am introduced the general understanding that fragility requires care, regardless of beauty. I then notice a similar fragility in the less beautiful vase (3) and having become acquainted with the standard of care for fragile beings, I feel compelled to extend my care to the less beautiful vase (4). Scarry’s account bears some similarity to Diotima’s description of the progress from the love of the beauty of a particular body to the love of the beauty of all bodies and on up the ladder; in both cases beauty’s connection to ethical development depends on a movement toward generalization. But in both cases, this initial movement from particular to general goes unaccounted for; it’s not clear in either case how or why the particular evokes the general.

There is also a difference between the two accounts, however, in that while Diotima describes a movement from love of a particular beauty to love of increasingly general beauties, in Scarry’s account love of beauty drops out of the picture immediately. Following Scarry’s story, it seems
that we leave beauty behind after step one. So it appears that the ethical compulsion felt in step 4 is just that, ethical, comes from the standard of care that is understood to pertain regardless of beauty. Understanding of this standard, not the beauty of the first vase, is what presses me to care for the second vase. Beauty is a catalyst, but once it introduces me to the standard of care, its job is done. The beauty of the first vase, though it brings home to me the need to care for what’s fragile, does not seem to be what exerts the pressure toward extending that care to other fragile beings. The pressure comes from the standard of care, the one that says that fragile beings require care.

This line of argument, however, assumes that understanding of the standard is fully detachable from the experience of the beauty of the first vase. It thinks of the experience of that vase’s beauty as a ladder, to be kicked away once I have climbed up to the standard. Some readers of Plato challenge this style of interpretation of the relation of the steps of the ladder to one another, and we may also challenge it in the reading of Scarry’s account of the movement from care for the beautiful to care for the less or non-beautiful. Understanding of the standard of care may remain bound up with the experience of the beautiful vase; indeed this seems to be the case more commonly than not. At least sometimes, if not often, the memory of the experience of the first vase’s beauty continues to support or facilitate my understanding of the standard even as I encounter the second vase. In such cases, the encounter with beauty remains part of the force exerting pressure toward the distribution of care to beings less beautiful than but equally fragile as the first vase.

Understood in this way, Scarry offers a plausible account of beauty’s role both in learning to care and in exerting some pressure toward the distribution of care by supporting our understanding of the need for that care when it comes to what’s fragile or vulnerable, an understanding that is compelling because it is not merely intellectual but “realized,” as Ronald Hepburn might say (55). Of course, as Murdoch notes, we can reach this understanding in other ways, ways that

14 See, for instance, Nehamas (100).

15 To realize, says Hepburn, “involves making or becoming vivid to perception or to the imagination. If I suddenly realize the height of a cumulo-nimbus cloud I am not simply taking note of the height, but imagining myself climbing into the cloud in an airplane or falling through it, or I am superimposing upon it an image of a mountain of known vastness, or...or...” (55)
may be “more important” (83). The site of a suffering being that evokes a desire to care and orients one away from the self seems a more important site of moral change than the site of the beautiful. But the point is that the experience of beauty supports other experiences of reorientation. The experience of beauty needn’t be seen as an alternative to other sites of moral change, but as a reinforcement of them.

One might hope to care for the second vase for its own sake, and to tend to its fragile and vulnerable nature without reference to the more beautiful vase. But what the experience of beauty does, on Scarry’s account, is help us to do exactly that: to see the fragility in that second vase and to respond to it for its own sake. Even though an experience of beauty may not be necessary to the initiation of an apt response in more morally urgent situations, even when the experience of beauty is not sufficient for the creation of such a response, it may support that response nevertheless.

I will say more about the importance of the contribution beauty makes to the nurturing of moral responses, but first I’ll turn to the matter of counter-examples, for they may seem to make moot the question of the relative significance of beauty’s contribution to moral life. I have argued that Scarry’s claim that beauty exerts pressure toward the distribution of care is plausible. But even if I have failed to convince readers on this account, there remains the weaker claim that beauty and ethics are causally linked through beauty’s elicitation of involuntary decentred attentiveness, and that this orientation or reorientation of the self in the face of beauty may affect me such that I voluntarily bring that kind of attention to subsequent moments. What then, are we to do with the multitude of examples of beauty-lovers who fail to act well, and--even more problematic--what of beauties that seem actually to elicit a morally poor response?

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16 This statement assumes the intrinsic value of at least some things as well as of people; it assumes that at least some things are worthy of care. Though such an approach may be the subject of debate, the intrinsic value of the second vase and its care-worthiness is assumed by Scarry’s central example, so I assume likewise.
5 Counter-Examples

We have now arrived at Nehamas’ “beautiful villains, graceful outlaws, tasteful criminals, and elegant torturers” (127). I have already mentioned some of the counter-examples that must be considered when one makes an argument for a movement from beauty to ethics. Music-loving Nazis are often hearkened to as a prime example of the coexistence of a sense of beauty and a horrifying ethical outlook. If beauty somehow fosters caring attitudes and acts, as Weil, Murdoch and Scarry argue it does, how can lovers of beautiful music participate in such a regime? One can point to the possibility that the Nazis may not in fact have been responding to the music’s beauty but were rather displaying their power and wealth or using music as symbol of cultural superiority, but the fact is that this kind of example hits a nerve. Even if one can be dismissed, there’s always another waiting in the wings. They show up on larger and smaller scales: if beauty leads to care, why are so many beautiful forests clearcut? How can I feel the urge to stomp on the delicate, frost-fronded eyelids of ice that this winter line the trail near my home—this being an act of wanton destructiveness that suggests a flaw or at least a lapse in in character (taking the point of view of virtue ethics) and which can be said to cause harm insofar as it is a species of environmental vandalism, unnecessarily disrupting environmental integrity? I find examples from my own experience the most convincing, the hardest to dismiss, and I encourage readers to think of their own such examples.

The case of my urge to break the beautifully patterned ice is particularly troublesome for one who wants to see a relation between beauty and ethics, as it is a case in which beauty might seem not only to co-exist with questionable if not condemnable ethics but indeed to provoke a morally poor response or incite me to act badly. The everyday experiences described in the introduction also fall into this category: I am envious of a friend’s beautiful apartment, I am greedy for the beautiful cookware displayed in a shop, I objectify the beautiful coffee server. In such cases beauty seems not only to sit side-by-side with ethically undesirable forms of attention but indeed to evoke such attentions, tempting me away from the decentred, caring attention discussed above. These are thus some of the most damaging counter-examples to the claim that there is a causal link from beauty to ethics.

Though I am in the process of arguing that the causal connection is significant, it would be foolish to pretend that these responses don’t exist or aren’t commonplace. They are
recognizable, all too familiar moments, and most readers will be able to generate more such examples from their own experiences. Of course, one might argue that ethically poor attitudes taken up in envious, greedy or inappropriately objectifying attention\textsuperscript{17} are not evoked by beauty, that their source is elsewhere. But if we want to argue that beauty evokes the ethically good attitude of concern for the other, an attitude that takes the form of decentred attention, the claim that beauty does not also evoke the ethically poor forms of attention looks suspiciously arbitrary. What reason is there for thinking that it can evoke one kind of attention and not the other?

Scarry dismisses the phenomenon of “beauty that gives rise to material cupidity and possessiveness” as an aberration, an “imperfect instance of an otherwise positive outcome” (7). She attributes this aberration to “miseducation” (7). She is, to my eye, too quick to dismiss this phenomenon and needs to say more than the quick two sentences she allots to the issue, but I think she is on the right track. What reason is there for thinking that beauty can evoke one kind of attention and not the other? One answer is that envious, greedy or objectifying attentiveness doesn’t seem an apt response to beauty, while decentred attention does. There seems to be something not just morally wrong but phenomenologically dim-witted about such responses, as Scarry’s use of the word “imperfect” suggests. By “phenomenologically dim-witted” I mean that there has been a failure in experience. Envious, greedy or objectifying attentiveness, as inapt, are forms of short-sightedness: we are missing something about the beautiful being if we respond in these clumsy ways. For these forms of attention are at heart attentions to the self: envy and greed are about a desire to have something for oneself, and inappropriate objectification can be seen to stem from a desire to have control over the subject-turned-object, bringing it under the purview of the self. Cass Sunstein, for instance, argues that the problem with pornography as he defines it “is that it treats one group of people as objects for the sexual use of another” (45). Such forms of attention are only superficially attentions to the beautiful. If we are attuned to the beautiful rather than to the self, we will respond in the way that is called for by the beautiful rather than by the self.

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\textsuperscript{17} I take objectifying attention to be ethically undesirable in cases in which seeing a being as subject is more appropriate. I leave open the question of which beings these are—whether the group of beings better addressed as subjects extends beyond humans, beyond animals.
This line of thought may seem problematic, however, in that it seems to say that beauty evokes decentred attention only when we give it our decentred attention. But although beauty’s role may look redundant when expressed in this way, it isn’t, for I am referring to two distinct moments in our attention to the beautiful. Phenomenologists have shown that the giving of my attention is a process. Obviously some minimal degree of attention is required in order to constitute a thing/person/environment as thing/person/environment in the first place. If not full-blown attention, I need some kind of pre-attentive openness to what Edmund Husserl calls “affective rays” from a pre-thematized object (82). But this is only the first moment in my coming to attention. My proposal in what follows will be that in the experience of beauty in which I am decentred, I am initially open to the affective force of the beautiful such that I discern a call to attend further, in a more decentred way, and I respond accordingly. Alternatively, I can fail to be open to the initial rays of affective force and may not even fully constitute an object as object—I may not notice it. Or I may notice it but fail to be open to its further call to become prominent in my field of attention such that my own concerns fade away. This, I propose, is what happens in the case of those distracted attentions represented by envy, greed and objectification. In such cases, the beautiful never get the chance to call us to decentred attention; its appeal falls on deaf ears. What is remarkable about beauty, however, is how often it succeeds in commanding our attention.

Let us then look at this process of coming to attention in more detail. Working with Husserl’s genetic phenomenology in *Analysis Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, Steinbock identifies a movement “from affection to (active) attention” (23). He writes, “By ‘affection’...Husserl understands the exercise of an affective allure [Reiz] on us, an enticement to be on the part of the ‘object,’ a motivational (not causal) solicitation or pull to attentiveness” (24). Husserl suggests that the not-yet-object exerts a power on us that motivates our attentiveness such that we do constitute it as object.\(^{18}\) While this is true, it is also true that even the basic allure to constitute an object as object requires a certain openness on our part, passive though our engagement may be at this stage. This initial openness is precursor to—or perhaps

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\(^{18}\) I note here that although Steinbock’s (and Husserl’s) discussion centres on an object and seems to mean by ‘object’ a ‘thing,’ a similar process is at work in the direction of attention toward a subject or a place. There is a basic call to constitute a person or place as a person or place, then there may or may not be a call to direct further attention to it.
more aptly, the beginning of—a subsequent openness that allows us to tune into a fully constituted, beautiful object’s call to put it at the centre of our attention.

Steinbock identifies seven styles of engagement or moments in the transition from affection to attention, beginning with the pre-thematic turn toward the not-yet-intended object and ending with attention to a thematized object that is also the object of full-blown cognitive judgements. At the most basic level, he says, “That something is actually heard or seen or smelled, etc., is due to “affective rays” radiating from the aspect of the object that draw in their wake the horizontal referential implications (24, italics his).”¹⁹ In my world, of course, I encounter many affective rays leading me in different directions, even once the object is constituted. Steinbock again:

in the living present there is not just one single ray of affective force on me; rather, there are many things exercising an affection, rivaling for my attention to some degree or other. For example, a mural on the side of a building may be particularly prominent, affecting us, and as we turn toward it a train passes by, blowing its horn, and when starting to turn toward the train, we smell the miasma of a broken sewer line. If we turn to the odor and look around to examine it more fully, the other affective tendencies fade back. All of them still exercise an allure, but they no longer make it through to us. (25, italics his)

I am positing that in the case of failures of attention to the beautiful—failures such as envious, greedy or inaptly reificatory attentions—once the beautiful has been constituted as a being, I then fail to attend sufficiently to it to be attuned to its further call to make it the centre of my attention, and incidentally to decentre myself. For if we construe attention broadly, not just as bare perception but as a perception that includes making something of concern, we can see that the self also exerts an affective force upon me, calling for my attention as do the mural, the train, the sewer, the kestrel. If I follow the call of the self, I may fail to perceive the call of the beautiful to attend to it as a central concern. Steinbock observes that “While there is indeed a kind of evocation on the part of the object’s plus ultra, this solicitation is only a later result of the affective allure eliciting our approach to it as this specific configuration” (24). This later evocation is where I am positing the failure that results in response to a being with envious,...

¹⁹ Steinbock’s quotation refers to Husserl’s ACPAS, p. 82.
greedy or inappropriately reificatory attentions that are ultimately attentions to the self. In such cases, one fails to attend to the beautiful in that one fails to hear the call to attend further, making the beautiful a central concern.

But isn’t it also possible that I could experience beauty’s call to decente myself yet willfully ignore it? Couldn’t I hear the call yet choose not to heed it, responding in an envious, greedy or reifying way? This is in principle possible in cases in which the call from beauty is not powerful in the way that Murdoch describes. Even if one were to willfully turn away from the call, however, beauty could hardly be the source of that willful turn in another direction; it is after all, a turn away from, a choice to ignore. Yet in the cases of envy, greed and reification, there does seem to exist, as noted, a call from the self in addition to beauty’s call to decentred attention, and one could suggest that beauty provokes this call. For at times it does seem that the presence of beauty sharpens a sense of lack in the self that results in a draw away from the beautiful and toward the self. Beauty is commonplace in advertising, is part of consumer capitalism’s manufacture of desire; its place in the construction of an endless sense of consumer lack suggests that it does serve this role of sharpening a sense of deprivation that ultimately turns one’s attention away from the beautiful and toward that apparent deprivation.

But responding to beauty with attention to one’s own lack remains phenomenologically inapt with regard to the beautiful. Beauty’s presence may illuminate a lack in us, but to turn toward that lack is to focus on beauty only in relation to that lack. It is yet again to be shortsighted, blinkered. This phenomenologically inapt, short-sighted response is supported by a culture that presents many if not most things (not to mention people) primarily in terms of ownership, as objects of consumption, as things that are owned or not owned, acquired or to be acquired. It is hard to put something pre-ordained as commodity into the centre. It is hard for a being so pre-ordained to claim that centre. It does happen, however; there are many moments in which beauty seems to brim over the boundaries imposed on it as a commodity. Then the attempt to commodify it looks ridiculous. I vividly recall once paying admission to look at a waterfall, and there was a dignity in the beauty of the waterfall that made the five- or six-dollar admission charge look silly; I felt silly having paid it. Who could really believe that the value of the waterfall had an equivalent in dollars! That this happens is one of beauty’s strengths, for when it does exceed its commodified self, it opens us to fuller, richer experiences of the world. But in
cases in which it is overwhelmed by the context of commodification, inapt responses to beauty are part of a larger cultural illness that fosters inapt attitudes to other beings in general.

Beauty, then, can catalyze envious, greedy, or reificatory responses, but only in combination with short-sightenedness on my part. I can fail to fully experience beauty’s call to attend—fail phenomenologically or epistemologically, if you will—and hence fail ethically as well, responding to the beautiful with selfish forms of attention, attentions that are ultimately to the self rather than to the beautiful. What then of the supposed line I want to draw from beauty to ethics in the form of the evocation of decentred attention? I’ve argued that in some cases my attention is too strongly focussed on myself for me to hear the call to bring attention to what lies beyond myself, also that I may hear the call and choose to stop listening. But didn’t Murdoch suggest that beauty overcomes such self-centred attitudes, isn’t that the point I’m making?

Not quite. My point is that beauty can and sometimes does overcome such attitudes. But it seems equally obvious that sometimes it can’t. My hope is that if readers recognize as familiar experiences of envy, greed and reification in the face of beauty, they will also recognize as familiar the kind of moment Murdoch describes in the encounter with the kestrel: “The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other thing, it seems less important” (82). My own go-to example for this kind of experience is a copse of cherry trees in the park near my apartment. When they’re in bloom, I feel lightened of the burden of myself. I give myself up to gazing, am filled with cherry blossom. And I do feel that I emerge from the experience clarified in the way that Murdoch describes. I wonder, in fact, if the experience of such clarification is kin to the experience of clarification that can strike one when one confronts death. That too is a moment of passive reorientation of one’s perspective, in which priorities can shift.

I find another example of the decentring effect of beauty in the encounter described in and enacted by Rilke’s famous poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo:”

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,
gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast’s fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

The seer—whose point of view I, as a reader, inhabit thanks to Rilke’s use of the second person—is struck by the statue, though it is but a fragment. The poem lavishes attention upon the statue, is an ode to it. Then it takes a dramatic turn in the last two, extraordinarily powerful lines: “For here there is no place that does not see you. / You must change your life.” Though the focus seems to turn away from the statue toward the seer, the point is that the seer has been reoriented toward and by the beauty of what he has seen and imagined. Although it’s possible that some readers experience this reorientation as amoral—perhaps experiencing the required change as a demand to immerse oneself in art, for instance—I experience the poem as a call to moral change. As I read it, the seer (and myself as seer-by-proxy) understands the world differently now, and knows his place in its differently: he is not at the centre, the statue is. As decentred, he must now change his way of living accordingly, must live as a being “adjacent” to others, to use Scarry’s term. The last line has a disarming effect (or perhaps ‘affect’) on me as a reader; the seer seems to me vulnerable, in some sense helpless in his imaginative encounter with the torso. The seer in the poem has not planned or willed this reorientation; it has happened to him. He has undergone it, as does the reader in imagination. Such passivity is part of the peculiar experience of being decentred by beauty, and Rilke enacts it powerfully in his poem.

I hope that these descriptions strike a chord, and I invite readers to consider their own experiences of beauty to find other such examples. My contention is that if there are instances in which beauty touches on a lack in the self such that we extend to the beautiful only the envious,
greedy or inappropriately reificatory attention that is ultimately attention to the self, there are equally moments in which beauty evokes decentred attention, sometimes despite ourselves. The causal link between beauty and ethics in the form of beauty’s promotion of decentred attention is not necessary, but it does exist in many instances. This is my most basic claim.

But how ethically significant is a relation that can and sometimes does obtain between beauty and the ethically valuable exercise of decentred attention? A relation that, should it happen to emerge, reveals to me a way of attending that I can extend to other beings but might not? It sounds a pretty weak link, perhaps weak enough to be ethically insignificant.

6 The Ethical Significance of Experience of Beauty

Given the non-necessary nature of the movement from beauty to decentred attention, and given that the extension of such attention to other beings may take some effort of will—though I have argued, with Scarry, that experiences of beauty may support such efforts—if we are to see any moral value in the experience of beauty, we’ll need to look not to the constancy with which the causal link obtains or describe a threshold frequency after which they become significant, but rather consider the quality and duration of the effect of the experience when it does obtain.

Both Murdoch and Scarry argue that the experience of beauty is morally valuable because of something it brings to moral life that nothing else does; each claims that it offers us something unique. Murdoch emphasizes the experience of natural beauty “not because I think it is the most important place of moral change but because I think it is the most accessible one” (83). This follows from Plato, she says, who saw that “beauty is the only spiritual thing we love by instinct” (83). Indeed, if we look to the Phadreus, we find Socrates speaking of the objects the soul encountered before it fell to earth and was trapped in a body; in those days, beauty “was radiant among the other objects” (250D). Even now, he says, “beauty alone has this privilege, to be the most clearly loved and the most visible” (250D-E). Murdoch’s point, then, inspired by Plato, is that natural beauty is morally valuable because it offers uniquely easy access to the experience of being decentred. It is effortless. Scarry’s claim is similar:

A beautiful thing is not the only thing in the world that can make us feel adjacent; nor is it the only thing in the world that brings a state of acute pleasure. But it appears to be one
of the few phenomena in the world that brings about both simultaneously: it permits us to be adjacent while also permitting us to experience extreme pleasure, thereby creating the sense that it is our own adjacency that is pleasure-bearing. (114)

Both Scarry and Murdoch are pointing to something unique about the way beauty evokes decentred attention, and in both cases they point to the hospitable character of the decentring: the ease or pleasure of it. But there is a significant difference. Scarry argues that because being decentred by beauty is a pleasure, we think of our adjacency as a pleasure, which implies that we will be inclined to seek out adjacency elsewhere. She is trying to defend the moral value of beauty by focussing on its distributional effect, but the second half of her claim is dubious. I’m not convinced that we think of our adjacency rather than of the beautiful object as the source of our pleasure; this description doesn’t map easily onto my experience. When I’m in the presence of the cherry blossoms, I am not usually focussed on my adjacency or even really aware of it; I am rather filled with the presence of the blossoms. The phenomenology is as Schopenhauer describes the experience of pure perception: “it is as if the object alone were there, without anyone to perceive it” (231). In these moments, the perceiver “can no longer separate the perceiver from the perception, but both have become one because the whole consciousness is filled and occupied with one single sensuous picture” (231).

Granted, Schopenhauer believes that in such a moment I become the “pure, will-less painless timeless subject of knowledge” and that what I contemplate is not the particular being before me but its “eternal form” (231, italics his). Both these claims assume metaphysical states and entities that are highly disputable, and as we have seen, they are at odds with an account of beauty that sees it as prompting the decentred attention. But in this case I am interested in the phenomenology of this aspect of his larger account, for it strikes a chord: his description of the un-self-conscious aspect of the perception of beauty, “as if the object were alone there,” matches my experience of the cherry blossoms. I am “filled and occupied” with them. I am focussed on them rather than on myself, so I am not particularly aware of my adjacency—it is indeed as though they were alone.

Not only am I not particularly aware of my adjacency when I experience of beauty, but neither do I, as Scarry claims, come away from the blossoms in search of experiences of adjacency tout court. For my pleasure is deeply associated with their beauty, and if it were also associated with
adjacency—in retrospect if not in the moment—it would be only in the context of that beauty. If I seek out other experiences as a result of the encounter, they are experiences of beauty. In my experience, beauty doesn’t drop out of the picture in my seeking out of similar experiences in the way that Scarry suggests, and there’s no reason why it should. Scarry’s account is, in any case, in danger of making the adoption of an adjacent stance self-serving, a process of seeking pleasure for myself rather than of extending care to the other.

Murdoch’s statement, on the other hand, suggests that she is less directly focussed on the distribution of decentred attention across beings both beautiful and otherwise than she is on the difficulty of being decentred at all, of having any such experience. As we have seen, Mudorch believes that we are inclined to be self-centred, and what is remarkable about the experience of beauty is the ease with which we shrug off that perspective. She doesn’t, however, spell out how it is that this ease is morally significant. Beauty introduces us to a possible way of being—one crucial to ethics—that is hard to know otherwise. But it is knowable otherwise: she tells us that beauty is not the most important site of moral change, which implies that there is at least one more—and more important—site of such change. That site is somehow harder to get to, yet the question remains: why do we, who are concerned with morality, care that we can easily shift toward decentred attention at the site of beauty when we can also shift, albeit with more difficulty, at a more morally important site? Why does ease matter? The only obvious answer is that the experience of ease in the case of beauty must somehow support our taking up a decentred position in other less easeful situations.

In her ethics Murdoch does not emphasize a rational choice made in a given situation but rather the construction of background beliefs and attitudes that underpin any given choice:

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praise-worthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at,
constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the texture of a man's being or the nature of his personal vision. (“Vision and Choice in Morality” 39)

Not only do we apprehend and assess people in terms of more than any single choice they make, but we are also constantly preparing, consciously or otherwise, for the making of those choices: “[i]f we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over” (SG 36). One becomes a person who attends in a decentred way to other beings by doing so continuously, over time.20. So every time that I am bidden to attend to something in a decentred way, it contributes to my attending decentredly in the future. It’s like building a muscle. It’s not that a single incident utterly transforms me; it’s that incident upon incident transforms me, strengthens my inclination toward that kind of activity. The experiences of attending “decentredly” at the easy sites both reveals the possibility of doing so at all and, more importantly, builds up a capacity to attend that support my attending in such ways at the harder sites.

This description is more convincing than Scarry’s description of experiencing adjacency to the beautiful as pleasurable, then looking for the pleasure of being adjacent in other situations. Closer to Murdoch’s account is Scarry’s thought that “there is no way to be in a high state of alert toward injustices...without simultaneously demanding of oneself precisely the level of perceptual acuity that will forever be opening one to the arrival of beautiful sights and sounds” (60-1). Here Scarry is gesturing toward a habit of openess that one brings to the world generally, to sites of beauty as well as to other sites. She doesn’t, however, make the argument that experiences at the site of beauty supports the development of such habits. She comes close when she says that the experience of the beautiful vase introduces me to a standard of care, but she suggests that my adoption of a standard of care is the result of a single encounter rather than something that builds up over time, through other such encounters, no single one of which is fully responsible for the overall inclination to care. (I will say more about this single-incident approach in a moment.)

20 This approach to ethics is obviously inspired by Aristotle, who, in describing the human good as “activity of the soul in accordance with the appropriate virtue,” reminds us that this activity “must be over a complete life. For one swallow does not make a summer” (NE 1098a).
Back to our original question: how can a causal relation that only sometimes obtains between beauty and decentred attention be of moral significance? In that when it does obtain, it is part of a larger structure that is being built by a number of incidents and by moral work of different kinds. Experiences of easily and gladly offering decentred attention to the beautiful support one another and together contribute to “the texture of a man’s [sic] being or the nature of his personal vision” in tandem with other aspects of and incidents in that person’s life. Because of the variability in the power of different beauties as well as different people’s differing susceptibilities to beauty at different times, it’s hard to say anything general and definitive with regard to beauty’s contribution to the gradually built tendency to attend in a decentred way to other beings. Beauty’s contribution may be different in different lives; in some it may be negligible, but in others its influence may be significant. And to exert a significant influence even sometimes is just that: significant.

Now here is a second, and perhaps bolder, response to the question of moral significance. Bolder because judgement of its worth will depend largely on readers’ experiences. Above, we saw that in Scarry’s example of the vases, a single encounter with beauty significantly reorients me—it is transformative. The beautiful vase is perhaps harder to imagine as life-altering than is Rilke’s torso of Apollo, whose far-reaching effect—“you must change your life”—is so vividly enacted by the poem. The poem presents the possibility that a person may have an experience of beauty so powerful in its decentring that it has a significant impact on how she lives her life afterward. And we need have recourse to only one encounter with beauty as decentring a single person in a lasting way for beauty to be understood as exerting significant moral influence. If readers can call up any such experience, the argument ends there. For myself, the beauty of Rilke’s poem itself has had a significant decentring effect. My hope is that at least some readers will have had some such experience in their lives. Even if these experiences are rare, their transformative effect remains morally significant to the degree that a lasting reorientation of any single being is morally significant.

Yet it will not have escaped the attentive reader’s attention that I have cited only one instance of such transformation. In the end, I find that although some encounters with beauty are powerfully decentring, and that this is worthy of note, Murdoch’s notion that these encounters do work that is ultimately not isolated but collective maps most accurately onto my experience. Given that our lives are a multiplicity of experiences, or perhaps that a life is a single experience in which
there are multiple moments, it makes sense to understand even powerful moments as cumulative in effect.

7 Conclusion

I have argued that the line of thinking that seeing beauty as moving us toward ethical living persists because it originates in a real phenomenon. It happens. Some of our encounters with beauty have an ethical effect; we have moments with kestrels, moments with statues like the torso of Apollo, moments with poems such as Rilke’s. These moments, I have argued, help us to attend decentredly to the beautiful and may also help us to attend decentredly to other beings and situations. I have argued that although intrusion upon beautiful people is a danger to guard against, one can’t even be aware of the possibility of intrusion without attention to the person’s situation. I also have argued that the multitude of counter-examples whereby beauty bears a relation to ethically poor forms of attention shows only that the relation between beauty and ethically desirable comportment is not necessary. It doesn’t mean that encounters with the character of Murdoch’s moment with the kestrel don’t happen and can’t have an effect.

I began this chapter by referring to Marcia Muelder Eaton’s somewhat reluctant dismissal of what she calls views of “psychological or behavioural causal priority,” whereby aesthetics is prior to ethics insofar as aesthetic engagement is thought to prompt ethically good behaviour (361). As she moves away from this view, she expresses some sympathy with it, writing, “On those days when I can still muster up some optimism I even believe that bringing students to love Henry James or Bach or Michelangelo will make them morally better” (361).

I suspect that at least part of the reason that Eaton turns away from this view hinges on the verb “will:” the works of James or Bach or Michelangelo will make students morally better. That is obviously not true, and Eaton has good reason to dismiss this claim. But substitute “can” or “may” for “will” and the claim is much more plausible. The possibility exists that an encounter with James or Bach or Michelangelo can be morally transformative, or at least supportive of the development of moral attitudes and tendencies. As can an encounter with a cherry orchard or a kestrel. Because people differ in temperament, education (understood broadly), experience and circumstance, not everyone will be moved toward the ethical by every encounter with beauty. Consider, for instance, Florentine in Gabrielle Roy’s novel *The Tin Flute*. Florentine is a
Catholic living in Montreal in the thirties; she has just discovered that she is carrying the child of a young man to whom she is not married and who has left her. The life she imagined for herself is in ruins. She passes the local marketplace and just doesn’t have the heart to respond to its beauties:

...Hundreds of flowers and plants were displayed in the sunlight on ramshackle stands; feathery masses of ferns swayed in the soot-filled air; pale jonquils bower to the least breath of wind; bright red tulips burst on the eye. And behind the parade of flowers Florentine saw the even ranks of smooth-skinned apples, of blue-veined onions, of heads of lettuce in which drops of water still sparkled. She turned her head away, hurt by this festival of colours, this wealth of earthy smells, in which she could never again take pleasure! Spring gave no quarter to those who hoped to ignore it! (201).

Florentine can’t take in the beautiful vegetables and flowers; despair prevents her from responding to them. They hurt her—because they remind her of her own unwanted fecundity? Because she feels unworthy of beauty’s pleasures? Whatever the reason(s), she turns away. She is too preoccupied by her own quite understandably preoccupying situation to respond to the fruits and vegetables with the kind of decentred attention Weil, Murdoch and Scarry describe beauty as capable of evoking.

But we can easily imagine Florentine on another day, passing the ferns, the jonquils, the bright red tulips, the sparkling drops of water on the lettuce and the blue veins in the onions and being moved by them such that they become the centre of her world, the centre of her concern. We can imagine this experience of other-centred responsiveness itself as a drop of water, one that is added to other experiences, beliefs and tendencies such that she continues to become, over time, a more other-responsive, other-concerned person. As I have argued above, the experience of beauty may be a drop in the bucket when it comes to building and supporting ethical tendencies toward decentred attentiveness, but collectively the drops may have their effect.
Chapter 3

Experience of Formal Beauty: the Problems of Distraction and Rhetoric

1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we considered beauty as ethically helpful in that it is capable of decentring us by drawing attention away from the self and toward another being such that the needs and desires of the other become of concern to us. This movement toward ethics may be generated by both formal beauty, understood to belong to the realm of appearance (refers to shape, size, sound, colour, etc.) and bearing no relation to other aspects of being and also by the beauty Marcia Muelder Eaton calls “contextual,” in which circumstances beyond appearance—factual beliefs and moral attitudes—bear on a being’s beauty (“On Kantian and Contextual Beauty” 27). We also considered some of the arguments that might be made against the claim that beauty’s effect on our attention can be ethically helpful: we looked at the problem of intrusive attention and at the problem of self-centred attentions, considered the host of cases in which people experience beauty but behave badly. There remain to be discussed, however, further ethically troubling issues that pertain to formal beauty in particular.

Trouble connecting beauty and ethics often arises when we consider beauty as pertaining to appearance apart from a being’s other aspects, including its ethical position.21 As Aryeh Kosman observes, “It is because we are inclined to conceive of appearance as antithetical to being, or at least as independent and separate from it, that we are inclined to regard beauty as the cosmetic epiphenomenon of being” (354). The view that cuts appearance off from ontological and ethical considerations and takes beauty to pertain only to such appearance has often been attributed to Kant, based on his description of the disinterested quality of the pure judgement of beauty,

21 I will use “ethical position” with regard to ethically inflected presences including both that of non-agents such as artworks or invasive plant species and that of potentially responsive, responsible agents. In the context of our discussion, ‘position’ may include ‘stance’ and/or ‘attitude’ and/or ‘act.’
though this attribution has lately been called into question. Nevertheless, it is true that according to Kant the pure judgement of beauty is made without reference to a being’s existence, ethical or otherwise (5:203-5:206). In elaborating on this remark, he said that when asked about the beauty of a palace, I might condemn “the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people on such superfluous things” but that this comment is beside the point when it comes to assessing the beauty of the palace (5:204). In judging the palace’s beauty I don’t consider such aspects of its existence; I don’t consider its existence at all beyond its “mere representation” in intuition or reflection (5:204-205). In this passage Kant sets the stage for the association of beauty with appearance, where appearance is divided from other aspects of a being’s existence.

The appearance-over-existence model of the judgement of beauty is now widespread. Most of us are familiar with the expression “beauty is only skin deep.” As we will see, thinking of beauty as skin-deep isn’t the only way of approaching the concept, and we will consider other approaches in further chapters. For now we might note Gabriel Richardson Lear’s observation that, “we are…familiar with the distinction between prettiness and beauty. When we say that something or someone is beautiful rather than pretty, we mean that the beauty is nobler than and not to be brushed aside as superficial charm” (“Response to Kosman” 361). ‘Beauty’ in this instance refers to more than formal qualities. We also speak of a person’s inner beauty, and of a beautiful moral gesture (such as bringing a meal to a new neighbour), neither of which are necessarily linked to appearance. Yet the version of beauty that sees it as pertaining to appearance as opposed to a being’s other aspects also persists. It’s possible that the two versions co-exist in the Western world because we have inherited both the ancient Greek tradition that sees beauty as more than a matter of appearance and the Kantian tradition that emphasizes consideration of formal appearance apart from context, and these traditions both continue to be powerful, despite standing in significant conflict. In any case, notwithstanding the ongoing influence of the ancient Greek tradition, the use of ‘beauty’ to refer to appearance apart from a being’s other aspects—formal beauty—is common enough to merit philosophical consideration.

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22 See, for instance, Diamuid Costello’s protest against Clement Greenberg’s interpretation of Kantian aesthetics as a species of formalism in “Greenberg’s Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory.”

23 …though less so in other passages, eg. his discussions of adherent beauty and of the human ideal (§16 & 17)…
Of course, a formally beautiful appearance is not in and of itself an ethical problem. Problems emerge from a tendency to assign the beautiful appearance more value than we should. We may do so in one of two ways. On the one hand, we may favour consideration of appearance over consideration of ethical position, either because we are blinded to a beautiful being’s ethically poor position or because we choose to ignore it. This I will call the problem of distraction, assuming that we take distraction to be a potentially more serious affair than the misplacing of keys because one’s mind is on something else.\textsuperscript{24} The ethical danger is that given such inclinations, we may applaud a being for its beauty and fail to address its ethically poor position. We may, for instance, admire the beauty of purple loosestrife (an example employed by Eaton in “Kantian and Contextual Beauty”) and either be blinded to or ignore its position as an invasive species choking out the other plant life around many North American waterways (27). In such a situation we value appearance over ethical position; delight in the loosestrife’s beauty either masks or trumps consideration of its ethical position.

Alternatively, we may mistakenly take the beautiful being’s appearance to be related to its ethical position and assume that its beauty reflects ethical goodness. In this case beauty does not just distract us from a being’s ethical position but actually encourages our approval of its ethical position without an adequate criterion. This I will call the problem of rhetoric. “Art,” says critic Dave Hickey, “outside the institutional vitrine of therapeutic mystery, is never not advertizing” (57). This is so, he says, because art participates “in that shifting, protean collection of tropes and figures that comprise ‘the rhetoric of beauty’” (57). Hickey takes a largely formalist approach to beauty,\textsuperscript{25} and when he characterizes beauty as advertizing, he is considering beauty as an appealing surface. Qua advertizing, the appealing surface is separable from but linked to content, linked in that it asks us to somehow endorse the artwork we find beautiful, including its content, which may include political, religious or moral views. Formal beauty often sounds alarm bells when it comes to ethics, for if a formally beautiful appearance can be related to content such that it functions as advertizing, beauty may advertize for an ethically suspect cause. The worry is that under the influence of a beautiful appearance, we may

\textsuperscript{24} The rise of concern over “distracted drivers” talking on cell phones gets at the more serious nature of some forms of distraction.

\textsuperscript{25} Hickey has explicitly called himself a formalist (“Revision Number Seven” 35).
find ourselves endorsing a being or situation that ethically we should not. Although Hickey is concerned with the deliberate deployment of beauty as rhetoric, beauty may function as rhetoric without any such pulling of strings: I may assume that because purple loosestrife is a beautiful flower, it is in sound relation to its environment, but in fact it is an invasive species in the process of strangling most other plant life in many river valleys. I overvalue the loosestrife’s appearance by loading ethical value onto it.

This tendency to overvalue formal beauty is highlighted in some of popular culture’s good-vs-evil narratives, in which beauty functions partly as disguise for the evil character: double agent Miranda Frost in the Bond movie *Die Another Day* is partly disguised as good by her angelic appearance, and the disconnect between her appearance and her wrong-doing creates some of the movie’s tension and thrill. The same is true of Mrs. Coulter in Phillip Pullman’s novel *The Golden Compass*. Lyra mistakenly takes her to be good partly because of her beauty: her golden hair, slim figure and lucid brown eyes. What may be thrilling in the escapist movie is troubling in the more serious novel and downright disturbing if it is part of our actual experience. Being taken in by a big bad wolf in beautiful sheep’s clothing can not only put us in danger of personal harm à la *Little Red Riding Hood*, but it can also put us in danger of assuming an ethically poor position if the beautiful fleece encourages us to miss or to ignore the wolf’s bad behaviour (the problem of distraction) or if we mistakenly applaud, support or emulate that bad behaviour, assuming it to be good on account of the fleece (the problem of rhetoric).

In what follows I will begin by investigating the question of the possible disconnect between appearance and a being’s other aspects, including its ethical position. I will consider Alexander Nehamas’ claim that the appearance and a being’s other aspects may be connected: if we find virtue in someone’s character, we can see that virtue in their appearance and find them beautiful on that account. In this case beauty of appearance is not purely formal and is not contrasted with being in the way that Kosman says we are currently inclined to do. This is beautiful appearance as a manifestation of being; it is character as embodied and thus perceptible. But although I will agree with Nehamas that it is possible for a person’s beautiful appearance to be a revelation of virtues including ethical virtues, it’s also possible for appearance and ethical position to be at odds when a person is formally beautiful but poorly ethically positioned. This means that beauty can yet be ethically problematic, either as distraction or rhetoric.
I’ll then consider Dave Hickey’s claim that in art, disconnecting form and content can shield us from propagandist efforts that bank on our susceptibility to beautiful rhetoric. But I will argue that this disconnection is helpful only in a restricted set of situations and that it may impede ethical engagement more than it helps.

Discussion of Hickey’s argument will reveal that averting the problems of distraction and rhetoric hinges on the ability to create and maintain enough critical distance from a being’s formal beauty to be able either to focus on the question of its ethical position (when beauty functions as distraction) or to distinguish its beauty from its ethical position (when beauty functions as rhetoric). At least one of Hickey’s lines of argument—the Beaux-Arts argument—suggests that he believes that we are capable of creating such distance. This may often be true, but it’s not clear that we are always so enabled. Some experiences of beauty verge on overpowering, in ways initially described by Plato and later by Nehamas, and beauty can be ethically and politically problematic as a result.

I will then consider the question of what we may do given this possibility. I will argue that even if it were possible, attempting to shut ourselves off from beauty qua appearance, to somehow deaden ourselves to its impact, would not be a helpful solution. Not only would this be a form of harm to the self, but it would also deprive us of beauty’s ethically beneficial effects. I will suggest that if we are concerned about being led astray by beauty, we might instead consider cultivating ethical sensitivity so that we are less likely either to be distracted or to mistake an ethically poor position for a good one and can continue to benefit from beauty’s positive effects, ethical and otherwise. I will also recommend that in order to avoid confusing formal beauty with the beauty of appearance described by Nehamas, we might work to develop an eye for formal beauty and an ability to distinguish it from the Nehamasian beauty of appearance, though I will recognize the difficulties this task may present.

2 The Disconnect Between Appearance and Being

Aryeh Kosman tells us that the ancient Greeks didn’t have “our” worries (where “our” presumably refers to contemporary Westerners, though Kosman is distressingly lacking in specificity about who exactly these worriers are) when it came to connecting beauty and the good. Why not? Because the Greeks tended not see a disconnect between appearance and
Kosman tells us that for Plato, “appearance is not something separate from being, but simply the presentation of what is to a subject: being, as we say, making its appearance. It is therefore not essentially deceptive” (354). With regard to the two ethical problems we are discussing, we can see that without such a disconnect, distraction is not an issue, for in this case a beautiful appearance does not distract from but reveals a sound ethical position. Misleading rhetoric is likewise only possible if appearance does not necessarily reflect being.

“We,” however, “are inclined to think of appearance as antithetical to being, or at least independent and separate from it,” observes Kosman (354). Insofar as this is true, they are more the children of Kant than Plato, taking to heart his noumena/phenomena distinction. They treat appearance as “an independent mask worn by being that may or may not resemble its true face” (354). Beauty, as allied with appearance, is thus subject to mistrust as a possible mask of being. For these contemporary Westerners there is unlikely to be a close relation between a being’s beauty and its ethical position, as ethical position refers to being and is separate from appearance. Under such circumstances beauty may even conceal a poor ethical position.

The Greeks, however, were not so foolish as to imagine that every appearance was an accurate presentation of being. Although their default position was not to imagine a disconnect, as ours arguably tends to be, Kosman tells us that they did see that appearance could become illusory as a presentation of being “in the context of something going wrong, a failure of uptake” (354). Kosman suggests, however, that ‘beauty’ was the predicate of appearances that were accurate presentations of being; if something went wrong, the presentation was not beautiful. “What appears well, we might say, appears in the mode of beauty” (Kosman 354). Kosman later connects ancient Greek beauty explicitly to the appearance of goodness: beauty (to kalon) “is the mode of the good that shows forth; it is the splendor of the appearance of the good” (355). So for the Greeks, in order to be beautiful an appearance must be an expression of being, and, further, that being must be good.

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26 Note that even Kosman’s way of talking here, his use of the contrasting terms ‘appearance’ and ‘being,’ suggests a disconnect. Having somewhat Greek tendencies, I am inclined to think of appearance as one aspect of being, and will hence contrast ‘appearance’ with ‘a being’s other aspects’ where possible in what follows, allowing for a disconnect between these aspects but not utterly cutting appearance off from being.
Because the Greeks saw the possibility of something going wrong such that appearance does not present being accurately (or such that we fail to grasp the relation of appearance to being), the significant difference between the ancient Greeks and contemporary Westerners when it comes to beauty is not so much that they saw less of a disconnect between appearance and other aspects of a being than their contemporary descendants do, though Kosman may be right that this is indeed a difference. The significant difference with regard to beauty is that for the Greeks a beautiful appearance was one that accurately or “organically” presents being, whereas for contemporary Westerners something may be beautiful in appearance in the sense that the appearance has whatever formal qualities are taken to be indicative of beauty. On the contemporary Western view something can thus be beautiful in appearance apart from consideration of other aspects of its being, including its ethical position. Both the ancients and contemporary Westerners see the possibility of a disconnect between appearance and other aspects of being, but they differ with regard to the question of whether ‘beauty’ can pertain to an appearance that somehow fails to connect us to a being’s other aspects. The ancient Greeks said no, contemporary Westerners say yes. That means that for the contemporary crowd, beauty can be a mask for ethically impoverished being.

I wonder, though, if my cultural contemporaries and I are indeed as distant from the ancient Greeks as Kosman suggests. The mistake that underpins the problem of rhetoric wouldn’t occur if we were: we wouldn’t be in danger of at times mistakenly taking a formally beautiful appearance to be a manifestation of goodness, as Lyra does in The Golden Compass. Our dissociation of appearance and other aspects of being would be more entrenched than this mistake shows it to be. Given that both the problem of distraction and the problem of rhetoric emerge in our lives, it seems likely that culturally we have both Kantian and Greek leanings, though one tendency may be more pronounced than another in a given individual. But I also propose that if we are right not to assume appearance to be a manifestation of other aspects of being, we are also right not to be too deeply committed to the division between appearance and other aspects of being, despite the problems of both distraction and rhetoric. Appearance is sometimes an organic expression of a being’s other aspects, and a beautiful appearance is sometimes related to a being’s ethically sound position. Although it is not always easy to distinguish the beauty of an expressive appearance from a merely formally beautiful appearance, it remains that there do exist cases of appearance that manifest an ethically sound position—or
what Aristotle might call ‘virtue’—and we are right to take these as embodiments of goodness. I am thinking here specifically of Nehamas’ discussion of the beauty of people.

3 Nehamas: the Appearance of Character

Nehamas does not associate beauty purely with appearance, but for him beauty is nevertheless “never detached from appearance” (63). In discussing human beauty in connection with appearance, he challenges the contrast between a person’s “inner” and “outer” selves. He argues that “psychological and bodily features interpenetrate” (68). He points to the possibility that appearance can be an organic expression of a person’s so-called “inner” self, which can be outwardly visible in “a glance, a cast, or a bearing” (55). The idea is that if we find a person’s character somehow appealing, we may find that character expressed in or rather “as” her appearance and experience her as beautiful on that account. Nehamas uses the example of the character of John Merrick, the “Elephant Man” in David Lynch’s film of the same name. Merrick suffers from elephantitis and is severely disfigured, but Nehamas argues that as we come to know Merrick in the course of the movie, we discover him to be “an intelligent, kind and sensitive man” (59). We thus come to find him beautiful—“not because we have become aware of his inner qualities but because his personality—his soul—is manifest in his appearance, which alters when it finds an alteration in us” (59). Rather than saying that his appearance alters, we might want to take a more objective view of appearance and say that we become sensitive to aspects of his appearance as manifestations of his soul, but Nehamas nevertheless accurately describes the way in which a soul can manifest as appearance. It needn’t, but it can. And although Nehamas associates beauty of appearance with a range of virtues, not all of them ethical, ethical virtues are among those that may appear—John Merrick is not only “intelligent” but also “kind” and “sensitive,” and these last two characteristics are arguably ethical, for sensitivity is an ethical virtue if it is sensitivity to others, and in the movie Merrick displays such sensitivity.

Nehamas points out that we not only may but have to depend on appearance for information about others: “[i]n one sense, all we ever know about a person is physical, since it comes to us through the senses” (69). “In one sense” qualifies the statement that all we ever know about a person is physical, but it should also apply to the statement that all we ever know about a person comes to us through the senses. The truth of this statement depends on how we interpret it. We
do learn about people without their appearing directly to us: through their recorded words, for instance (I have learned about Nehamas through his book), through their effects on and in the world (I learn about my mother through her garden), and possibly through reports and stories from trusted sources (I learn about Stephen Harper through the CBC). Our understanding of and exposure to a person is not entirely dependent on her appearing in the flesh. But recorded words, effects and reports are also appearance-dependent sources: I have to see or hear the recorded words, experience the effects, see or hear the report. In this sense, Nehamas is right: appearances are all we have to go on. But this still leaves room for some appearances to be more revelatory than others, and for some to be misleading.

Nehamas himself takes Danto to task for failing to distinguish “being beautiful” and “looking good”—these are not the same, says Nehamas (97). Although beauty is connected to appearance, merely looking good is not necessarily being beautiful. Nehamas associates “looking good” with adherence to standards of attractiveness: in discussing Jacques Louis David’s *Death of Marat* and photographs by Sebastião Salgado, he says, “the reason their good looks are the first thing we notice about them is that they conform to our own standards of what counts as looking good” (97). Beauty, on the other hand, cannot, for Nehamas, be reduced to such conformation—it is rather about extending a promise of happiness, a hope that my life will be somehow better if the beautiful is part of it (101). This promise may be extended by something or someone good-looking, but it needn’t be; it may also be extended by one “who is in fact ugly” (62, italics his). Nehamas doesn’t say what constitutes in-fact ugliness, though he does contrast it with the subjective “finding” of someone ugly (62). If we consider this phrase in connection with what he says about the good-looking, we might be justified in thinking of in-fact ugliness as depending on the standards of attractiveness that determine good-lookingness. These standards allow us to judge certain features as objectively ugly, at least within a given culture, so to be in-fact ugly on Nehamas’ view is likely to be not-good-looking. In any case, the point is that even on Nehamas’ account, appearance is not always revelatory of a being’s other aspects in the way that Merrick’s appearance is as we get to know him. To be merely good-looking in the Nehamasian sense of conforming to a standard of attractiveness reveals little to nothing of other aspects of one’s being, and it has the potential to be misleading if we incorrectly assume a relation to other aspects. Appearances can be misleading.
Even so, it remains true that a person’s appearance can reveal other aspects of her being, including her character. In addition to the example of Merrick, a character whom we find beautiful when we learn to see his virtues in his face and bearing, readers might also consider this photograph of Jean Vanier, founder of the L’Arche communities in which people of a range of mental and physical ability, from the highly functional to the highly dysfunctional, cohabitate. Here he is, enjoying the presence of one of his companions:

![Jean Vanier with a companion](image)

Figure 1  Cushing, Pamela. "Jean Vanier on Becoming Human"

“Even a simple smile before the camera or a way of holding one’s body…manifests, to however small an extent, a character and a personality,” says Nehamas (69). Even in a still photograph, the warmth and gentleness visible in Vanier’s face as he smiles makes him beautiful in appearance. I couldn’t say anything about his character in general based on a single photograph, but I see warmth and gentleness in his appearance in this moment. Admittedly, having heard him speak and knowing something of his life history, values and conduct makes me more confident in reading his smile in this way, just as the fictional Merrick’s beauty becomes more apparent as we get to know him better in the course of the movie. It is otherwise conceivable that Vanier is a good actor thinking, “you twit,” as he smiles warmly. But I have conceded the possibility of deception; I only want to show the alternative possibility, that a beautiful appearance may be an organic expression of good character.

Why is this a point worth making? It shows that we are wrong if we are inclined to think of appearance as only or even primarily deceptive, as Kosman says “we” are. And this point will
become relevant as we continue our discussion, for I will eventually raise the question of whether we should be open to beauty of appearance given the possibility of mistakenly taking beauty for goodness. If beautiful appearance can be an organic expression of good character, it’s harder to answer “no” to that question, as we shall see. But although Nehamas challenges the dichotomy of inner and outer by showing that there’s more to a person’s appearance than bone structure, scent and eye colour and by arguing that the so-called “inner” appears, this position is not incompatible with one that claims that the appearance of the inner is not exhaustive of appearance. One may still claim that there exist features such as bone structure, scent and eye colour that are not affected by character but can constitute a person’s formal beauty.

Nehamas proposes that such merely formal aspects of appearance tend to fade from consideration of beauty as we get to know a person—Merrick’s misshapen face, its form, no longer looks grotesque to us as we begin to see the manifestation of his soul in his face and find his face beautiful on that account. But as we have seen, Nehamas’ starting point is different from the one we are taking in this chapter; he approaches the beautiful as the object of love and beauty as a promise of happiness. For him, “beauty is never detached from appearance…But it is also never exhausted by it” (63). We, however, are currently considering a common approach to beauty that sees it precisely as exhausted by appearance—indeed, as pertaining only to formal features, which even Nehamas allows can amount to “looking good” if not to being beautiful as he understands it. Unlike Nehamas we are considering the ethical import of a beauty that is precisely a matter of formal features, that consists only of things like bone structure, scent and eye colour. For the formalist, even a weak formalist who admits the possibility that good character can manifest in appearance as beauty, there is yet the possibility of a split between beauty of appearance and character—if not in every instance, at least with regard to such features. And this split admits of the possibility of making the sorts of ethical misstep described above: overlooking or ignoring the poor ethical position of a being formally beautiful in appearance or mistakenly assuming that a formally beautiful appearance indicates a sound ethical position.

4 Hickey: the Virtue of the Form/Content Split

Unlike Nehamas, art critic Dave Hickey highlights the separability of form and content—terms that more or less correspond to what we have been discussing above as ‘appearance’ and
‘character.’ In the context of art, ‘content’ is usually contrasted with ‘form’ and refers to what the artwork is about or what it means, including any message(s) it may be conveying. The conventional contrast of content and form, which pertains exclusively to sensuous qualities—shape, size, sound, colour, etc.—is somewhat misleading, however, as form often contributes to an artwork’s meaning, can be part of the meaning in ways that bear more discussion than is possible here. But even given a contribution of form to content, it remains possible to consider form apart from this contribution, and that is what Hickey does.

Given his emphasis on form as distinct from content, it is perhaps surprising that with regard to beauty Hickey sees some political and ethical good coming of the split—surprising because, as we saw Kosman argue, the split often underlies ethical concerns about beauty. Hickey is not unaware of the political and ethical problems that can arise when beautiful form functions separately from content but is assumed to emerge from or to reveal content; he identifies what I have called the problem of rhetoric. He chastises those who assume the experience of art to be redemptive “regardless and in spite of the crazy shit that individual works might egregiously recommend” (53). Beauty, as a matter of form, need bear no internal relation to content. It is detachable. But beautiful form may nevertheless be associated with content, taken to reveal or reflect the worth of the content, and for Hickey this is where ethical problems emerge. It is precisely on account of the ability of a beautiful appearance to recommend “crazy shit” when it is associated with a content to which it bears no internal relation that Hickey also argues that there is a sense in which “choosing beauty over content...is always an act of sedition” (97). He is in fact arguing that what I have called the problem of distraction is not an ethical problem but an ethical solution, a solution to the problem of rhetoric.

Hickey argues that during the Renaissance the church and other governmental bodies began using art as propaganda and rode roughshod over content: “Henceforth, images argue[d] for things—for doctrines, rights, privileges, ideologies, territories and reputations” (9, italics his). Beauty’s role was to advance the argument by valorizing the image’s content. This, of course, is where the worry about beauty’s role as rhetoric emerges: we are apt to mistakenly understand a beautiful appearance to reflect an ethically sound position. And it needn’t. So how does Hickey see value in the dissociation of beautiful form or appearance and content? He looks to the Beaux-Arts movement that rose in the wake of the rise of image-as-argument. Hickey tells us that these “cosmopolitan dandies” were “dismissed by their German counterparts as ‘preening
dancing masters”(106). They were the quintessential aesthetes, unabashedly revelling in form and indifferent to content. On account of their exclusive concern with formal beauty, one might be inclined to see them as ethically neutral at best, if not ethically irresponsible given their disinclination to engage with ethical content. Hickey, however, argues that these dandies released viewers from the influence of church and state by focussing exclusively on the beauty of the paintings, apart from their content (106). The powers-that-were banked on viewers associating beautiful form and content; the Beaux-Arts practitioners split form and content, and focussed only on form, hence releasing themselves from beauty’s influence as propaganda.

In a similar manner, Hickey defends the art dealers who are often currently reproached by other members of the art institution27 because they care only about what an artwork looks like, not “what it means” (5). The dealers are in fact politically and ethically helpful, says Hickey—more so than their institutional counterparts, who do care what the artwork means (5). He compares the art dealers to Foucault’s king, who also cared only about appearances: “the appearance of loyalty, the rituals of fealty” (6). The king didn’t demand that you be loyal in your heart of hearts, only that you show loyalty. Foucault, Hickey tells us, compares the king favourably with Jeremy Bentham’s warden, who “demands our souls” and depends on self-censorship and internalized guilt in order to maintain his power (6). According to Hickey, because neither the art dealer nor the king care what something means, only what it looks like, “radical content has traditionally flourished under the auspices of their profound disinterest” (7). In the terms I have been using, we can say that the king and the art dealers suffer from what I have called the problem of distraction, ignoring content and leaving the rest of us free to take it up in whatever way we like.

Hickey begins from the assumption that concern with formally beautiful appearance can distract from concern with “the logos and ethos” of what appears (9). Above, we find two ways in which he shows that this distraction can be helpful with regard to the ethos of what appears. In the

27 I note that Hickey insists on the division of mercantile dealers from educational and government-employed administrators. He tends to present the latter as institution-bound and the dealers as institutional outsiders. But I do not follow him here, because there are strong links joining art dealers and what Hickey refers to as institutions. Dealers, for example, regularly visit the visual art studios of prestigious educational institutions. Prominent dealers, furthermore, play an undeniably curatorial role in their selection of certain works and artists over others, making decisions that—whatever their basis, be it salability, appearance or content—affect the institutional determination of what counts as art.
Beaux-Arts discussion, his argument is that if the person so preoccupied is someone who is being presented a beautiful appearance as propagandist rhetoric, her focus on beautiful appearance to the exclusion of content may free her from the influence of that propaganda. And in the case of the art-dealer or king, the argument is that if the person preoccupied with appearance is someone who has the power to legislate content and seeks control, it leaves the rest of us free from the influence of his oppressive values; artists are free to advocate for whatever meaning they like via their work, and viewers are free both to interpret content as they see fit and to engage with any visual argument they choose.

Both are real possibilities, but both also leave room for alternative possibilities with less ethically and politically desirable effects. The later of Hickey’s two outcomes depends on a big “if.” The benefit of the split between form and content in this case depends on a specific scenario. It obtains only if the person distracted from content and focussed exclusively on form is someone in a position of power, and if concern for “radical content” flourishes among the less powerful. But what if the person distracted by beauty is not an oppressive ruler (in either the world of politics or the world of art) but someone who could benefit from considering the radical content Hickey has in mind? What use is this radical content if we are too distracted by appearance to notice it? This after all, is the possibility on which the king pins his hopes: that if he forces citizens to spend all their time and energy on conforming to sumptuary laws, they will have little time and energy left to consider other aspects of their existence under the regime (i.e. the “content” of their lives) and to mount resistance or foment unrest. The ethical and political benefit of the form/content split depends on who it is that is preoccupied with form at the expense of content. The benefit only emerges if the person distracted by beautiful appearance is someone (mistakenly, apparently) trying to control a population via control of appearances, but any of us might make this division between appearance and content and overlook or ignore content, possibly to our detriment.

As to the Beaux-Arts case, in which a person ducks out from under the influence of oppressive content by focussing on beautiful appearance instead of on content, the benefit of the split between the two depends on the harm or benefit of the content. Focussing on beautiful appearance and ignoring content may be useful in the case of content that may harm us, but it could equally lead us to ignore the “radical content” that beauty can argue for and which Hickey thinks is of benefit to viewers. Indeed, he argues elsewhere that the point of Robert
Mapplethorpe’s controversial photographs of gay sex in Portfolio X was that their beauty celebrated the acts portrayed and invited viewers to do likewise, and he criticizes the museum director who defended the photographs on formal grounds. The director claimed that the sophisticated viewer “responds to the elegance of the form regardless of the subject matter” (16). This focus on form instead of content, says Hickey, misses the point. He instead praises Republican senator Jesse Helms for correctly taking the photographs as a stance against his values (14-15). In this case, Hickey has a problem with taking a Beaux-Arts attitude toward the images because he thinks the photographs presented content that was (and likely still is) ethically important to consider.

Hickey’s discussions reveal genuine ethical and political possibilities when we take beautiful form and content to be separable and focus on form to the exclusion of any relation it may have to content, i.e. when we allow beauty to “distract” us. But although he argues for ethical and political benefits of the form/content split, he elsewhere insists that the two are married and should be treated as such—in his discussion of Mapplethorpe, for example. Beautiful form and content are also married in what he calls “the greatest works of art,” for as we saw in the introduction, he says that these are always selling us something, and this is impossible without a relation between form and content: it is beautiful form that Hickey believes will make the sales pitch for content. “Beautiful art sells,” he says: “if it sells itself it’s called idolatrous and if it sells something else it’s called advertizing” (8). “The greatest works of art,” he concludes, “are always invariably a little of both” (8). So although Hickey’s discussions of the Beaux-Arts tradition and of the king who imposes laws governing appearances reveal possible benefits of a form-content split, Hickey also decries the radical split and the exclusive focus on form when he finds the position being advocated for by beauty to be of value.

What emerges from consideration of Hickey’s discussion is the conclusion that while it’s possible to ignore beauty’s sales pitch for an ethically dubious position if we consider beautiful form in abstraction from ethical content, we are not always advised to perform this abstraction, for we may miss out on the presentation of an ethically valuable point of view. I will come back to this point and consider it further in what follows, but first we might think more deeply about the possibility of resisting formal beauty’s rhetorical sales pitch for an ethically poor position as well as the possibility of resisting distraction from dubious ethical content by beautiful form. As we saw in the last chapter, beauty’s effect on us can be powerful. I have asked readers to
consider the travails of the helpless beholder in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and have referred to Nehamas’ account of an inclination to stare at the beautiful, an inclination he finds “almost impossible to resist” (53). This overpowering quality, the rendering of the beholder at least somewhat passive, helps beauty to be effective as advertizing. That is why church and state commissioned beautiful paintings to convince Renaissance viewers of the validity of their tenets and values, and why the advertizing industry today continues to use beauty to sell commodities ranging from cars to maxipads. So the question matters: is it possible to resist beauty’s spell so that a comely appearance doesn’t either distract us from an ethically poor position or function as rhetoric convincing us of the validity of that position?

5 Responding to the Ethical Danger

Resistance to formal beauty qua rhetoric means performing the abstraction of formally beautiful appearance from ethical position; resistance to formal beauty qua distraction means first noticing ethical position then giving it due consideration. These acts will either be habitual, embedded in our ways of encountering the world, or they will take some effort. If Kosman is right that contemporary Westerners tend to see appearance and being as separate, we are already culturally well-equipped to perform the required abstraction in the first instance. Both the philosophical literature since Kant and everyday experience of a profusion of ironic responses to messages from the media suggest that he is right to some degree: a cultural habit is in place. But how firmly is it in place? As argued above, advertizers would hardly continue to use the rhetoric of beautiful appearances if it were ineffective. The cultural tendency to separate appearance and being seems to have limitations—and later I will argue that those limitations are good. However, it does mean that both acts of resistance to the effects of formal beauty may require some work.

The question of resistance doesn’t obviously emerge in the case of the aesthete who actively ignores ethical position as opposed to the aesthete who is simply oblivious to it, for insofar as the former is willfully ignorant, she is willfully turning away from ethics and toward beauty; beauty

28 I will now be using “ethical position” to include the ethical content presented by an artwork, for such presentation is part of the painting’s ethical position vis à vis the rest of the world.
is not necessarily overpowering her; she is complicit. On the other hand, some aspect(s) of the experience of beauty likely play a role in motivating her decision to immerse herself in beauty and in beauty alone. Although immersion in beauty may be motivated by a turn away from—away from the complicated negotiation of ethical relations, for instance—beauty nevertheless has considerable drawing power. So the question of resistance has relevance even in the case of the willful aesthete, only in this case it is just a piece of the puzzle; her ethical indifference is an issue that stretches beyond the matter of beauty’s appeal. And because she resists resisting, there may be nothing to be done in such a case but hope that she has an ethically charged experience that reveals to her the need to be ethically engaged. That leaves us to consider the means of resistance of the inadvertently distracted perceiver and the perceiver susceptible to rhetoric, inclined to take a formally beautiful appearance to reflect an ethically sound position.

We have already approached the issue of resistance in the previous chapter, with regard to the problem of intrusion. I asked whether, given that the experience of beauty can be powerful and that we are often relatively passive parties to the experience, we can always resist the urge to stare or otherwise impose our attention upon a beautiful person. Now we may likewise ask whether, given the sometimes powerful effect of formal beauty, we can always resist its effects as rhetoric or distraction and separate formal appearance from consideration of ethical position.

At first glance the similarity of the two questions suggests that the answers will be the same in both cases, but they aren’t necessarily. For in the last chapter I argued that although beauty’s draw may be powerful, the act of attending often reveals reasons to cease attending if such reasons exist. Attending may reveal to me the possible inappropriateness of my attention—when I notice the discomfort, annoyance or anger of the person who is the recipient of my attention, for instance, or if in a job interview I tune into the circumstances such that I see that my attention is inappropriate in this situation. But when I need to be aware of and responsive to ethical position rather than slip into a beauty-induced ethics-blind coma or uncritically assume beautiful rhetoric to reflect an ethically sound position, experience of the beautiful appearance doesn’t obviously promote antidotes to these tendencies, i.e. it doesn’t itself seem to promote my dividing formal appearance from ethical position (rhetoric) or distancing myself from exclusive concern with formal appearance (distraction). In the cases of rhetoric and distraction, beauty doesn’t obviously undo its own effects as it may in cases where intrusion is a danger, in which instances beauty can, by drawing us to attend, reveal reasons not to attend. What’s needed here
is not a wholesale turn away from the formally beautiful being at hand, but a focus on aspects beyond its formal beauty. And it’s less clear how the beautiful appearance itself might encourage this focus.

It’s possible, however, as argued above, that a beautiful appearance may have the ethical benefit of drawing my attention to it at all, of drawing attention away from myself and toward that beautiful being; in so doing I may become inclined to care for it and hence inclined to be better attuned to it generally, in its multiple aspects, in order to respond with appropriate care. In this sense a formally beautiful appearance may indeed promote attention to its other aspects, and may thus be helpful in averting the danger of distraction. But as we saw above, beauty needn’t elicit that kind of care. My attention to it may ultimately be an attention to the self, so distraction remains a possibility. Nevertheless, the promotion of attention to a formally beautiful being’s other aspects through the elicitation of care remains a possibility.

But care may seem to lead us in the wrong direction, for what’s required is not just attention to a being’s ethical position, but critical attention—an attention that assesses ethical position. We must be willing to judge as poor an ethically poor position, and this attitude may seem to be at odds with the caring attention beauty can promote. Care may seem to lead away from criticism and toward support. In the case of the problem of rhetoric, we may have the same doubt as to the helpfulness of care in diminishing the influence of rhetoric. Ethically, do we really want encouragement to care for, even to nurture formally beautiful propaganda—isn’t this the opposite of what’s called for?

The answer here will depend on what we take care to involve. I propose that care can include addressing ethical weaknesses, that such address can be a form of support. If my brother has a tendency to lie, I may care for him despite that tendency, and part of caring for him will include helping him toward truthfulness. Insofar as we can speak of caring for an artwork, we might consider Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, with its beautifully constructed sentences, which might incline us to care for the novella. Controversy over whether Heart of Darkness is racist is ongoing, but if there are indeed senses in which it promotes racist views, caring for the novella can and arguably should include acknowledging and addressing its racist passages. Formal beauty may spur this care, but care can extend beyond such beauty to an artwork’s ethical existence.
The upshot is that formal beauty may help us when it comes to avoiding the dangers of distraction and rhetoric it may present. But it needn’t. We are not guaranteed to feel an urge to care for the formally beautiful, nor to care in the way I have described. So formal beauty may yet lead us down either of those two ethically problematic paths, casting its spell over us such that we ignore or are blind to questions of ethical position or such that we uncritically assume the ethical goodness of the beautiful being’s position. Given the sometimes overwhelming power of a beautiful appearance, there may be little we can do in such instances. Beauty may simply be ethically problematic in these cases.

But it should be noted that a beautiful appearance is seldom if ever completely overpowering. Even Nehamas, who says that his desire to stare at a beautiful person is “almost impossible to resist,” goes on to claim that it is not in fact irresistible and that he won’t always act on his urge (53). With regard to a beautiful being’s ethical position, we are often capable of remaining sensitive to that position even as we take in its beautiful appearance. Artworks such as Edward Burtynsky’s photographs of mine tailings depend for their power on our feeling the tension between formal beauty and an ethically poor position. My admiration for his photographs’ formal beauty—the appeal of the bright colours, of their contrast with the rest of the landscape, of the curving paths of the mine tailings—is in tension with my condemnation of the environmental devastation portrayed. This tension has propelled his photographs into galleries across the world. Burtynsky banks on our sensitivity to the disconnect. But to what degree one keeps from “falling” for beauty’s rhetoric or distraction and away from ethics will depend both on the power of the particular beautiful being and on individual circumstances and sensitivities.

Despite the above possibilities and despite particular circumstances that may work against the rhetorical or distracting effects of a formally beautiful appearance, we are still left with the possibility of falling for beauty, of being either convinced by it or distracted by it. This leads us back to the question of whether we should protect ourselves from those rhetorical and distracting powers where we can by cultivating an indifference to beauty, a habit of looking through it, as it were, and a reflexive separation of appearance and being. The deliberately amoral aesthete will obviously see no reason to do so; devotion to beauty and to beauty alone is a conscious stance. In this case love of beauty is less the ethical problem than is his lack of responsibility. But the questions are pertinent for those of us who may find ourselves inadvertently distracted from a being’s poor ethical position by its beauty or mistakenly taking a beautiful appearance to reveal
an ethically sound position. Given these possibilities, are we advised to steel ourselves against beauty’s impact to the best of our ability so as not to be distracted? And should we be vigilant about seeing appearance as disconnected from a being’s other aspects so as to see past beautiful rhetoric?

6 Why Stay Open to Beauty’s Effects

6.1 Against Deadening

In response to the first question, which asks whether we should steel ourselves to beauty’s effects, I will argue for the cultivation of ethical sensitivity rather than a deadening of responsiveness to beauty that may seem to be called for in light of the possibility that a beautiful appearance may distract one from a poor ethical position. Ethical sensitivity allows me to be alert to a poor ethical position, while retaining responsiveness to beauty otherwise. This responsiveness is valuable for several reasons. One is that being cut off from responsiveness to aspects of one’s world is to be to some extent lifeless. Part of what it is to be alive is to be responsive, and the deadening of the self to the world’s appearances is a form of harm. It is to miss out on what J. M. Berstein calls “experience,” which he describes in terms of being touched by, affected by elements of one’s environment: “to have an experience is to undergo something, to suffer something, and to do so in such a manner that one is changed thereby.” (Adorno 114).

Why should we want such experience, why seek change? Says Bernstein: “[t]o imagine experience coming to an end...is to imagine a world in which nothing would or could matter to an individual...in which subjects were beyond meaningful change and transformation. An image of death as somehow an ideal state” (Adorno 114). To experience is to be open to possibility of being changed and to be open to the possibility of being changed is to live. Bernstein again: “The image of life without experience is ultimately the image of life without history, as if the meaning of a life were in its eternal cessation, death” (Adorno 115).

Experience of beauty is among those Bernstein lists as experiences we undergo and are changed by (Adorno 115). Nehamas characterizes beauty similarly: as stirring in the beholder a love that involves a willingness to be changed by the beautiful beloved:
I don’t approach you with a settled sense of myself, taking my plans and my wishes for granted and counting on your assistance with them. Instead, I expect them—I want them—to change once I expose them to you...I willingly give you power over myself emotionally, ethically, and intellectually, trusting you not to exploit it. By becoming vulnerable in this way, I put my identity at serious risk because I have no way of telling how our relationship will ultimately affect me (57).

It is on account of this openness to change on the part of the beholder that Nehamas considers beauty to be a risky business. It should be noted, however, that in Bernstein’s later essay, “In Praise of Pure Violence,” which is partly a critique of Scarry’s life-giving beauty, it becomes apparent that for him, not just any kind of beauty will provide us with experience. Bernstein excludes from the class of experience-providing beauties classical beauties. He endorses the Modernist rejection of a classical form of beauty “whose cold perfection is at one with its pretense to timelessness” (“In Praise of Pure Violence” 41). Classical beauty is, for him, deadening rather than enlivening, for his claim is that enlivenment is only possible against a background of death—as the adage says, “blessings brighten as they take flight.” Classical beauty, pretending to timelessness, is incapable of providing that background. We might wonder how this admitting of death fits in with the earlier characterization of experience as offering us life over death, but of course, the death he refers to there is the living death of numbness, not the coming death that makes life shine by contrast.

The enlivening effect of beauty in the felt presence of death does seem to be a real phenomenon—the shadow of death can indeed make life more intensely experienced, and beauty can be particularly affecting when we sense its passing. But is this the only way in which we can be enlivened; mightn’t classical beauty also be enlivening, if in some other way? Kant, for instance, says that the mind’s faculties are “enlivened” (belebten) in the presence of beauty (5:219). Without a concept sufficient to the intuition of the beautiful object, the faculties engage in a free play that generates a pleasure he describes as a “feeling for life” (5:204). The beautiful object that creates this enlivening of the faculties could well be beautiful in the classical way
Bernstein rejects (5:217). If beauty doesn’t exactly change me on Kant’s account, it is yet far from numbing, appears to be powerfully engaging: he refers to the beautiful as inducing in man “an ecstasy for his spirit in a line of thought he can never fully develop” (5: 300). This never-fully-developed quality of the thought induced by beauty suggests a kind of endless growth toward the never-realized thought.

Although I am concerned by the restricted set of beauties Bernstein allows to be enlivening and experience-providing, I have introduced him into our discussion because I agree with him about the importance of experience in the sense of undergoing something and being open to be changed by it. And I agree that beauty can provide such experience; it is part of what I find compelling about Nehamas’ description of the vulnerability of the beholder who finds herself opened up by beauty. Because such experience is fundamental to life in the way Bernstein describes, turning our backs on beauty for fear of falling prey to distraction or to rhetoric is ill-advised. To deprive ourselves of the experience offered by beauty is to do harm, for it is to be disconnected from our world, which prompts us to grow and change when we are connected with it. This disconnect is the dark side of the significantly ironic culture in which I live, and many of us suffer loneliness and alienation as a result.

Bernstein emphasizes the difficult character of the experience of beauty, difficult because it includes the acknowledgement of death. But beauty also has a long association with solace and hope, an easing of pain when we are not in the benumbed state that concerns Bernstein but are suffering, and this too is a reason to allow beauty to touch us. Consider that we bring flowers to a funeral partly because of the solace their beauty can provide. Consider also the testimony of poet Roo Borson: “Dusk falls; happiness disintegrates. A colourless institutional light props up the four walls of the dormitory, apartment, or motel, draining the world… // To grow abject so quickly in the absence of beauty: a lonely malady, difficult to prove or explain” (124). Or consider the experience of rapper Darryl McDaniels, whom I heard just this morning on the radio. He was telling of a year in which he had struggled with suicidal thoughts and said that

29 The Kantian account is not, however, without relation to Bernstein’s. On the Kantian view, enlivening experience doesn’t rely on a life-and-death contrast, but rather on another species of presence-and-absence contrast: the presence of an intuition and the absence of a corresponding concept of beauty. This presence and lack stirs the mind, making for an intensity of experience rather than the numbness Bernstein describes as the outcome of classical beauty.
listening to Sarah MacLachlan’s song “Angel” every day that year saved his life. The song is arguably sentimental and could be said to hover somewhere on the border between beauty and kitsch, but even if we disagree with McDaniels about its beauty, we might give thought to some of the lyrics: “it’s hard at the end of the day / I need some distraction / oh beautiful release.” If beauty can at times be a distraction and if that distraction can at times present a roadblock to ethical living, it can also help us—even a distraction that amounts to numbing. There is a time and place for distraction, even from ethical matters: distraction may give us relief from debilitating pain, may let us rest and recharge then continue to face a difficult situation, perhaps an ethically demanding situation. In this sense, there may be indirect ethical benefits to beauty, even as distraction.

If there are non-ethical and indirectly ethical reasons for remaining open to beauty despite the ethical pitfalls it presents, we have also seen more direct ethical benefits from responsiveness to beauty. Even a purely formal beauty can promote decentred attitudes, which are ethically valuable experiences, as argued in the last chapter. The beautiful appearances of diverse aspects of the world can cause us to wonder, to stand in awe and humility before a kestrel, a Frank Ghery building, a beautiful face, such that we are no longer the centre of our world. This kind of experience promotes efforts and tendencies to care for beings beyond ourselves.

6.2 Against the Habitual Disconnect of Form and Other Aspects of Being

Having argued that there are significant reasons for staying susceptible to experiences of beauty despite the danger of distraction from ethical demands, we might now move from analytic description to prescription and consider the second question I posed, that of whether we are advised to develop a habitual response to appearance and other aspects of being that sees them as separate—taking this approach in order to be immune to beauty’s power as rhetoric. But this wholesale approach is also ill-advised given Nehamas’ observation that a person’s character—the so-called “inner self”—can appear, can be outer. If we didn’t allow ourselves to depend on appearances that manifest character or disposition, our understanding of others and our

30 For a discussion of this distinction, see Kathleen Higgins.
engagement with them would be impoverished. Not all appearances are deceptive, not all are cut off from being, as Kosman claims that “we” tend to assume. Part of knowing my husband is knowing his gait, and his gait is partly a manifestation of his character: he doesn’t strut, isn’t cock-of-the-walk, but humble and patient, and he walks with an easy-going lope that shows this.

But perhaps we should respond to appearance and being as separate only when we encounter a beautiful appearance? This too is to be impoverished. For not all formal beauties of appearance are reducible to what Nehamas calls the merely good-looking. We can learn about and experience Vanier’s goodness through his beautiful smile, and I learn about my friend A. through the beauty of her frank, open gaze. To disregard the visible goodness of the beautiful appearance of a Vanier is to be at least partly blind to the ethical presence of people whose influence we may want to seek out. A beautiful appearance that is not misleading but is a reflection of a person’s ethically laudable comportment is an entry point into their goodness, is part of how we get to know such people and continue in relationship with them if a relationship has been established. Part of my on-going relationship with A. is my continual encounter with the beauty of her frank gaze, and I hope that it has an influence on me. It is partly on this account that we might consider cultivating ethical sensitivity, including sensitivity to ethical stances as they appear in a person’s body (this aspect of ethical sensitivity is in fact ethico-aesthetic sensitivity). Sensitivity to ethical position can help us to be alert to occasions on which a formally beautiful appearance coincides with an ethically poor position, for it makes us more likely to sense the jarring of formal beauty and a poor ethical position.

But to be ethically sensitive in this way includes a fair degree of aesthetic sensitivity—as with the case of sensitivity to the bodily appearance of ethical position, it is ultimately a hybrid, is ethico-aesthetic sensitivity. To grasp discrepancy between ethical position and appearance ultimately requires a grasp of both aspects of the being in question: its ethically poor position and its formally beautiful appearance. One needs to be aware of both in order to see the discrepancy. So if it isn’t advisable to deaden ourselves to beauty’s impact in order to avoid distraction, nor to develop a habit of seeing appearance and a being’s other aspects as divorced, nor to develop a habit of seeing beautiful appearance and a being’s other aspects as divorced, we might yet want to develop a sensitivity to what we might call merely formal beauty—that which Nehamas does not even consider to be beauty but distinguishes as the good-looking—and to learn to see this beauty as separate or at least separable from ethical position. Consider the
beauty of someone’s particularly blue eyes, for instance, or the loosestrife’s graceful stem: we may admire the blue eyes and the graceful stem without assuming any relation to ethical position, and it may be advisable to learn to do so in appropriate instances.

Discerning appropriate instances is a skill, however, and the separation may not always be easy to perform. It can be hard to distinguish the beauty of the kind gaze from the beauty of the sheer blue of the irises—the two beauties belong to one pair of eyes, are entangled there. This makes it easy to mistakenly take the beautiful blue for a beautiful gaze. Or what of a person’s graceful carriage—this could be the embodiment of an ethically profound attentiveness and attunement to her environment, but it could also just be someone who happens to be well-coordinated. Still, ethical sensitivity to the embodiment of an ethically poor position—in an arrogant gaze, for instance—can allow us to find the appealing blue of the eyes jarring, can help to reveal the blue as playing the role of rhetoric at odds with being. In such instances ethical sensitivity alerts us to the presence of merely formal beauty, though an ability to see the blue as formally beautiful is also helpful in revealing the discord with ethical position.

As we saw above, Burtynsky’s photographs of mine tailings depend on our being sensitive to that disconnect; it is possible to be sensitive in this way. The cultivation of such sensitivity may be hard-won—there does exist the ethical danger of failing to perceive such a disconnect—but this sensitivity can be worked toward such that in the presence of formal beauty we may tend not to lose sight of the beautiful being’s ethical position.

7 Conclusion

Formal beauty does bear a relation to ethics, can be a force for the good, as we saw in the last chapter, but the relation is not untroubled. We have seen that both the problem of distraction and the problem of rhetoric can arise in the presence of formal beauty. If formal beauty may be ethically helpful in decentring us, it may also be ethically problematic in either of these two ways.

Dave Hickey argues that taking formal beauty as distraction can work against the effects of such beauty employed as rhetoric. But because distraction presents its own problems when it comes to ethics, it isn’t the most promising ethical solution, and it succeeds in a limited set of situations.
We have also seen Alexander Nehamas argue against the appearance-reality split that we are required to make if we follow the path of the Beaux-Arts practitioners described by Hickey. Nehamas shows that not all beauty of appearance is formal; a person’s so-called “inner” self can manifest outwardly, her good character can show in or as her body and make her appear beautiful. To see appearance and character as split is to miss these manifestations of character, which are a significant part of both our getting to know and continuing to engage with another person, an engagement that may include learning from her ethical example.

Formal beauty may work against its own possible effects as distraction and rhetoric. It does so through the promotion of care for the beautiful being. In the case of distraction, the beauty of the being before me may incline me to care for it, and although I may initially be drawn into care without consideration of its ethical position, the inclination to care may cause me to be better attuned to it generally, in its multiple aspects, in order to respond appropriately. Beauty’s elicitation of care may also be helpful in addressing formal beauty that functions as rhetoric, for care can include addressing a being’s ethical weaknesses and supporting ethical change where possible. But as discussed in the previous chapter, care isn’t necessarily evoked by beauty. Nor do all forms of care include attention to ethical position. This means that the ethical character of formal beauty is double-edged in terms of the responses it can evoke. It can do harm. And if there are truly cases in which its effect is overpowering—such as Plato describes in the Phaedrus or Stendhal’s reported beauty-induced faint in the basilica at St. Croce—there is nothing to be done about this ethical harm. But it’s not clear that beauty is ever completely overpowering. Because it often isn’t, I shifted from the work of analysis to address the question of prescription, for the obvious and urgent question arising from this analysis is whether we may be advised to anaesthetize ourselves to such beauty insofar as possible, cultivate a desensitized demeanour. But I pointed out that this would be to deaden the self, which is a form of harm, and to miss out on the benefits—ethical and otherwise—that experience of formal beauty can offer. I suggested instead that we might concentrate on cultivation of ethical sensitivity as a safeguard against the problems of distraction and rhetoric. I also suggested that we might want to develop an eye for merely formally beautiful appearance and to learn to see at least it as separate or at least separable from ethical position, while remaining open to the contextual instances of beautiful appearance described by Nehamas. This can be hard to do, for merely formal beauty and the perceptible beauty of character may be difficult to distinguish. But this is our task if we are to
remain as responsive as possible to the world around us, both in its beauty and in its ethical character, whether in a given situation these are separate or integrated.

In both the last two chapters we have considered links between beauty and ethics in terms of the morally-relevant responses beauty can elicit. The first chapter considered the ethically helpful decentring effect that both formal and contextual beauties can have, and in this chapter we have considered the ethically impeding effects of formal beauty in particular. We have seen that it can distract us, willingly or unwillingly, from a being’s ethical position or can function as rhetoric, masking or even recommending an ethically poor position. We will now turn to a different kind of relation between beauty and ethics, one that emerges when instead of beginning with the experience of beauty, we turn our attention the shape of ethical relations. We will look at the shape of ethical relations in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* in particular, and will examine his mysterious claim that virtuous action is “for the sake of the beautiful [to kalon]” (NE 1120a23). I will argue that there is a sense in which we can think of beauty as the formal cause of virtue. Beauty is “formal” in this case not in that it refers to aspects of appearance apart from a being’s other dimensions, but in that it refers to the shape or structure of our ethical relations, as we shall see.
Chapter 4

Beauty as Formal Cause of Ethical Relation

1 Introduction

Having discussed beauty as formal in the art-critical sense of referring exclusively to appearance in abstraction from a being’s other aspects, we will now consider beauty as formal in the sense that it refers to a shape or structure of relations. I will be arguing that when we take such an approach to the concept of beauty, we can see a way in which beauty can be a formal cause of ethics, a point I will make through discussion of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In the *Ethics* Aristotle makes three claims about the end of virtuous action: one chooses virtuous actions “for their own sake,” (1105a30) “for the sake of happiness [*eudaimonia*]” (1102a2-4) and for the sake of the beautiful: “actions done in accordance with virtue are beautiful and done for the sake of the beautiful [*to kalon*]” (*NE* 1120a23). Later we will look into the question of the relation between all three claims, but our primary focus in this chapter will be the effort to make sense of the third and somewhat mysterious claim. Exploration of this claim about the relation between virtue *to kalon* and of the line of thinking that the claim can be seen to represent will help us to understand a second possible relation between beauty and ethics.

Not only does Aristotle claim, at 1120a in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that virtuous action is for the sake of the beautiful, but earlier he also says that virtue is directed toward the beautiful—this in the context of a discussion of the virtue of courage. He tells us that a courageous person acts “for the sake of the beautiful [*tou kalou heneka*] for that is the end toward which virtue is directed [*toute gar telos tês aretê*],” and he concludes, “it is for the sake of the beautiful [*kalou dê heneka*] that a courageous person endures and performs emotions and deeds appropriate to

31I have been unable to find a full translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that translates ‘*to kalon*’ as ‘the beautiful,’ although Aryeh Kosman does translate it thusly in discussion of the *Ethics*, as noted in what follows. I am otherwise working primarily with Roger Crisp’s translation of the *Ethics*, but because he renders ‘*to kalon*’ as ‘the noble’ whereas I will be arguing for a translation of ‘*to kalon*’ as ‘the beautiful,’ I have altered his translation of the term to reflect the view I will be presenting.
courage” (*NE* 1115b12–13; 1115b23, quoted and translated by Kosman, 342). These claims that virtue is for the sake of beauty and that beauty is the end of virtue should be of interest to anyone concerned with the possibility of understanding beauty and ethics as related. Aristotle’s theory of causality sees ends as causes; if beauty is the end or the for-sake-of-which of virtue, it is a “cause” of virtue.

The concept of formal causation may rest uneasily with contemporary thinkers, and it may be thought to be outdated—of historical interest but without relevance to the investigation of contemporary philosophical problems. I propose, however, that although the concept of formal causation may be questionable when it comes to contemporary metaphysics, it can be relevant to a contemporary discussion of ethics if we consider cause as aim. Following Aristotle, I will argue that acting ethically involves aiming at creating and maintaining a relation with a certain structure or form. We might even propose that insofar as I aim at that structure or form, the structure or form motivates me by being such an aim. Either way, that structure or form can be called a “cause” of my act: I act as I do partly because I seek to create a relation with a certain form. It is in this sense that I will be using “formal causation” in what follows.

I am not a scholar of classical Greek philosophy, so I approach this task with humility and will be leaning on those with greater knowledge of Aristotle than I have. I hope, however, that I can bring knowledge of aesthetics to bear on Aristotle’s claim about beauty in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, while also bringing Aristotle into the realm of aesthetics in a way that looks beyond his *Poetics*.

What discussions there are of beauty and ethics tend not to focus on Aristotle’s claim that virtue is for the sake of beauty. We will see, for instance, that this claim does not appear in Marcia Muelder Eaton’s survey of the range of views presenting aesthetics as prior to ethics, yet it is as

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32 A full discussion of beauty as formal cause not just in the sense of ethical end but also as a motivating ethical end would have to involve more careful consideration of what it is to be motivated and would likely include consideration of our pleasure in or enjoyment of the beautiful form of ethical relation. Those who are interested might begin with Lear’s discussion of the Aristotelian good as *to kalon* in the sense of pleasurable, although she does not discuss this pleasure in connection with the fittingness or form of ethical relations (“Aristotle On Moral Virtue and the Fine”).
plausible a candidate as many others she discusses (“Aesthetics: the Mother of Ethics?”). This relatively common oversight may be partly due to the range of English translations of ‘to kalon,’ which is sometimes rendered as ‘the beautiful,’ sometimes as ‘the fine,’ ‘the fair’ or ‘the noble’ (Rogers, 355n1). These last three translations are particularly prevalent in translations of Aristotle’s writing on ethics, for it is sometimes thought that the contemporary English word ‘beautiful’ doesn’t stretch to apply to ethical contexts as the Greek ‘to kalon’ does. I will be arguing, however, that there is at least one sense in which the contemporary term ‘beautiful’ maps onto Aristotle’s use of ‘to kalon’ in the Nicomachean Ethics, and that it does so in a way that reveals an understanding of beauty and ethics that allows us to see beauty as a formal cause of ethics. It is possible to discern in Aristotle a point of view from which we find that the structure of a sound ethical relation or set of relations is beautiful and that my action in forging or maintaining such relations is partly guided by a sense of beauty.

After describing this perspective, I will consider Eaton’s rejection of what she calls “the formal priority” of aesthetics to ethics, a category to which my argument for beauty as a formal cause of ethics might seem to belong. I will consider her reasons for dismissing formal priority partly so as to distinguish the kind of formality I have in mind from the kind she discusses; my intention here is to further illuminate the concept of form that I am presenting. I will then finish by discussing two possible sources of objections to seeing beauty as a formal cause of ethics in the way I have described. First I will address the possible counter-examples presented by ethical actions that may not be beautiful. Then I will address three objections stemming from Levinas’ alterity-based ethics. I will begin, however, by defending the feasibility of translating ‘to kalon’ as ‘the beautiful’ in the Nicomachean Ethics.

2 Translating To Kalon

Before getting into discussion of beauty as formal cause of ethics in the Nicomachean Ethics, the preliminary matter of translation needs to be addressed. For there is some question as to whether Aristotle is indeed making a claim about what we call ‘beauty’ or whether to kalon is a different concept, one that it makes little sense to translate into English as ‘beauty,’ at least in the context of the Nicomachean Ethics. Those who object to the translation of ‘to kalon’ as ‘beauty’ point to the wide range of beings and actions that are described as to kalon in Greek philosophy and
claim that our term ‘beauty’ doesn’t apply as widely. Kelly Rogers notes this objection, observing that although the “primary literal meaning” of to kalon in Aristotle’s time was ‘beautiful’ and had been since the days of Homer,” the word was used to describe everything from ornamental robes to princes (355). The implication is that we currently use the word ‘beauty’ in fewer contexts than the Greeks did ‘to kalon.’ Kosman makes a similar observation about the range of beings and actions to which to kalon is attributed by the Greeks: “kalon is applied both to girls and to the burial of one’s parents” (346). This is part of why he objects to translating ‘to kalon’ as ‘the beautiful.’

Objections to translation of ‘to kalon’ as ‘the beautiful’ tend to depend on understanding ‘beauty’ in its current usage as applying only to appearances qua formal in the sense discussed in the previous chapter—i.e. to appearance considered as a matter of shape, size, sound, colour etc.—and as misused when applied in other contexts in the way that ‘to kalon’ is. Kosman, for instance, finds that to contemporary English ears, the connection of virtue and beauty is a strange one. It seems a counter-intuitive use of the word, he says: “For us, ‘she acted beautifully’ and ‘she acted rightly’ do not mean the same thing, nor do ‘she’s beautiful’ and ‘she’s virtuous’”(344). It is partly for this reason that he argues that the translation of ‘to kalon’ as ‘beautiful’ in such contexts is not entirely satisfactory.

I will not be claiming that these terms are synonymous—I am with Kosman on that point—but I do claim that it can make sense even to contemporary ears to describe one who acts rightly as acting beautifully or one who is virtuous as beautiful in that sense. Berys Gaut agrees, observing that common usage allows that “we may say of a kind and generous action that it was a beautiful action” (117). Gabriel Richardson Lear, for her part, presses Kosman on his claim about the inappropriateness of linking beauty with the right and the virtuous, and I think she is correct to do so—partly because I agree with her observations about common usages that extend beyond the context of formal appearance, partly because there is a common understanding of even such formal beauty that joins it to a particularistic ethics such as Aristotle’s (“Response to Kosman”). This last point will be discussed in the following section; for now I will explore and amplify Lear’s point.

Lear proposes that what Kosman sees as a difference between concepts may in fact be a
difference between philosophical theories of those concepts, and she argues that *to kalon* is not as distinct from the ordinary sense of ‘beautiful’ as Kosman suggests (358). She wisely concedes that we do often think of beauty as superficial, skin-deep. I say “wisely” because this usage is too common to ignore: we have only to look to the industry of “beauticians” and “beauty parlours” to note the ubiquity of this usage in a non-philosophical context—or consider South Korea’s “Beauty Belt,” a stretch of downtown Seoul internationally known for its numerous plastic surgery clinics (McKinnon). Even in such cases, however, I suspect that ‘beauty’ may be the term of choice because it connotes the more-than-cosmetic, the dream that is sold by the beauty industry being that of transforming one’s life by transforming one’s cosmetic appearance. Beauty peddlers often pretend to sell a beauty that is more than skin deep—the implied outcome of a beauty treatment is a happier, more fulfilled, more likeable person. Nevertheless, English-speakers do regularly speak of beauty as skin-deep; it’s a common saying, perhaps even partly because the term has been used by the beauty industry to sell cosmetic treatments of various kinds, although we shall see that there are also other, older sources for this way of understanding beauty.

Even if most English-speakers are familiar with an understanding of beauty that sees it as skin-deep, Lear notices that “we are also familiar with the distinction between prettiness and beauty. When we say that something or someone is beautiful rather than pretty, we mean that the beauty is nobler than and not to be brushed aside as superficial charm” (361). I add to Lear’s observation the familiar distinction between inner and outer beauties, in which ‘inner beauty’ generally indicates virtue (where ‘virtue’ may include but is not necessarily restricted to moral virtues). Or consider references to a person’s character as ‘beautiful.’ This use of ‘beauty’ also suggests virtue. And what of the ‘beautiful gesture,’ which usually picks out a thoughtful or caring act, i.e. an ethically good act? Then there is the common expression “beauty is as beauty does,” which associates beauty with ethical action. These usages are not outlandish, and each suggests a connection between beauty and a person’s good character or good action. Together

33See Berys Gaut’s discussion of the claim “that moral character constitutes a kind of beauty” in chapter six of *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, esp. 114-27 (107).
they show that contemporary English-speakers have some working understanding of beauty as a concept that bears at least some relation to the ethical aspects of one’s life.

3  To Kalon and To Prepon

Given that English-speakers sometimes use ‘beauty’ in connection with ethics, it becomes the task of the reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to figure out what the connection might be in this particular account of ethics: how might virtue and virtuous action be “for the sake of beauty?” Although Aristotle does not provide a definition of *to kalon* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Rogers points out that in the *Topics* Aristotle defines *to kalon* as *to prepon* (the fitting). This is not the only way in which Aristotle characterizes *to kalon*, but it is the only definition he offers, and it is the aspect of *to kalon* most relevant to conceiving of beauty as a formal cause of ethics.\(^{34}\) I will be arguing that a connection of beauty to ethics appears through this characterization of the beautiful as the fitting, a sense of the fitting being fundamental to Aristotle’s particularistic ethics, as we shall see. My contention in this section is that this characterization of the beautiful as the fitting is perennial; it shows up in Aristotle and continues to be common today, so it isn’t much of a reach for a contemporary mind.

As Rogers observes, Aristotle frequently associates *to kalon* with *to prepon*, the fitting (356). Rogers cites the *Topics*, in which Aristotle defines *to kalon* as the fitting and later says that the fitting cannot be a property of *to kalon* since, in fact, the two are the same (Rogers 356; Aristotle 102a5-6, 135a13-14). The relationship proposed between the beautiful and the fitting is that of synonym, and association of these concepts persists in Aristotle’s ethics: Rogers draws attention to a passage in the *Eudaimonic Ethics* in which Aristotle states that *to prepon is to kalon* (Rogers 356; Aristotle 1249a). And although Aristotle makes no corresponding claim in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he does associate beauty and the fitting—the magnificent person, for instance, spreads his wealth in the “noblest [i.e. most beautiful, κάλλιστου] and most fitting way” and the virtuous person is one who bears what befalls him “most nobly [most beautifully, 

\(^{34}\) Rogers also discusses Aristotle’s characterization of *to kalon* as “the praiseworthy” (358-60). Lear, for her part, argues for Aristotle’s *to kalon* as having three aspects, “effective teleological order, visibility, and pleasantness” (“Aristotle on Moral Virtue and the Fine” 116). Though she does not mention the fitting, her discussion of teleological order can at least be seen as compatible with the fitting in terms of an order suited to or “fitting” its end.
κάλλιστα], and altogether appropriately” (NE 1122a, 1100b, both trans. by Rogers 356).

This association of beauty with the fitting is familiar to contemporary Westerners. It is not the only way in which beauty is currently understood, but it is one way. Kathleen Higgins, for example, argues that our cultural notion of beauty is a cluster concept consisting of a set of recurring elements. The first elements she lists? “[A]n orderly structure” and “unity wrought from distinct elements” (95). Each of these connotes fit. A structure is orderly only if the parts stand in some kind of fitting relation to one another—Toronto’s Lee-Chin Crystal, for instance, home of the Royal Ontario Museum, has been criticized for its incongruity in relation to the Victorian building that previously housed the ROM and still stands alongside the new building. “It looks impossibly out of place in the context of the 90-year-old stone museum,” reads a newspaper report on the building’s placing number eight on a website’s list of “World’s Top 10 Ugly Buildings” (“ROM’s crystal voted one of ugliest buildings”). The city block’s overall architectural structure is argued to be poorly ordered, its elements fitting together badly; hence its status as ugly. Like an orderly structure, unity also requires a fit among parts; if there is no fit or they are badly fitted, they are disunified, though this may be a lack of fit or disunity that many postmodern artworks deliberately seek out—Sina Queryas’ deliberately ragged long poem *Expressway* being a case in point.

The understanding of beauty as at least partly or sometimes defined in terms of fitting relation has also surfaced in my on-going series of interviews with contemporary poets on the subject of beauty. Consider Sonnet L’Abbé’s discussion of the poem “Crystallography” by fellow poet Christian Bök: “I find some of Christian Bök’s work to be staggeringly beautiful. This poem works for me with a kind of mathematic elegance...Like a piece of Baroque music, it is all pleasing proportion and symmetry” (par. 11). “Pleasing proportion” is a matter of fitting relations among parts, refers to parts that are somehow well aligned with one another and with the reader’s capacity for pleasure, and “mathematical” elegance also suggest relations that are well-calibrated, i.e. fitting, as in an equation.

The association of beauty with some kind of fit or alignment is a thread running through many contemporary accounts of beauty, a thread that leads back to the Greeks but is still part of Western culture today. Even an essay such as Sally Banes’ “A New Kind of Beauty,” which
investigates “punk ballerina” Karole Armitage’s turn away from classical ballet toward “a new kind of beauty,” frames Armitage’s work as a response to the view that “[g]reat dancers with impeccable line...[show] themselves to us in a supremely internalized unending harmony” (Robert Gerskovic, quoted by Barnes, 268). The starting point for Armitage’s dances is the tradition that associates dancerly beauty with internal alignment and harmony; Armitage is understood to have been in dialogue with that “old” beauty as she “lurched dangerously off balance and scrambled all around” the guitarist in her radical ballet Vertige (274). The dancerly beauty associated with the balance and harmony of “impeccable line” is a familiar enough paradigm to stand as the background for a performance that works in an opposite aesthetic direction. Note also that Armitage, for all her interest in “distorted and dissonant...movement” nevertheless describes her ballets as “[retaining] a regal centre from classicism” (274). Something of the old beauty remains even in the new paradigm of less coherent movement.

I have already said that although beauty has a current association with the ethical, Kosman is right to point to the existence of an understanding of beauty as pertaining purely to appearance (in the restricted formal sense), in a realm distinct from that of the ethical. This understanding has traditionally been attributed to Kant, as Lear observes, thanks to his distinguishing of the judgement of beauty from the judgement of the good in terms of interest. Kant tells us that the judgement of beauty is “disinterested” in that the judge considers an object's representation in abstraction from questions related to its existence. According to Kant, in judging the beauty of a palace, we don’t ask who built it, why and under what circumstances. In judging beauty “one only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction” (5:205). He later describes the object of aesthetic judgement this way: “That object the form of which...is judged as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object” (5:190). Judgements of beauty are concerned with the representation or form of the object rather than its existence; judgements about the good, however, are described by Kant as “interested” in the existence of an object and concern themselves with more than its

35 I note that in a later discussion of the ideal human beauty Kant introduces more contextual considerations bearing on the judgement of beauty (5:232-36). But Lear is nevertheless right that historically Kant has been associated with a formal approach to beauty, largely on the strength of the remarks quoted above, which appear in the second section of his “Analytic of the Beautiful.”
representation or form. Kant thus draws a contrast between the two kinds of judgement, and interpretations of this section of the “Analytic” to the exclusion of others has led to an widespread understanding of beauty as pertaining to a being’s appearance apart from questions about the being’s ethical position or relations.

I mentioned earlier that there is a common understanding of even superficial beauty that joins it to a particularistic ethics such as Aristotle’s. The connection is this: even when we consider beauty as pertaining purely to appearance in abstraction from a being’s other aspects, it is common to consider beauty as dependent on fitting relations among and within elements of that appearance: are the colours of the furniture complementary, is the face symmetrical, do the voices harmonize? We may debate what counts as a fitting relation, but the principle remains current even in judgements of beauty that pertain to appearance in isolation from moral or ontological considerations. Indeed, the association of beauty with fitting relations shows up even in Kant, for although he says that the judgement of beauty is made without grounding it in any concept of the object—which would include one such as fitting relations among its parts—he does ground the judgement in a “pleasure in the harmony of the faculties of cognition” (5:218, italics mine). To say that the faculties are harmonious is to say that they fit together somehow, that they stand in some kind of suitable relation to one another. This pleasure in the harmony of the faculties, Kant later says, “can express nothing but its suitability [that of the representation] to the cognitive faculties that are in play” (5:189, italics mine). So in addition to the faculties’ being well-suited to each other, the representation of the object deemed beautiful is also well-suited to the faculties. The concept of suitability or fit is thus at work even in a Kantian, concept-free judgement of beauty, for the judgement depends on our taking pleasure in the suitability of a representation to our cognitive faculties, on the fit between them.

Given Aristotle's association of to kalon with the fitting, and given that the association of beauty with the fitting is familiar even to a current reader, there may be good reason for translating 'to


36 Kant later describes similarities in the structures of the two judgements such that beauty is a “symbol” of morality, a matter I will take up in more detail in chapter five (5:207). Nevertheless, the different aspects of an object with which the two styles of judgement concern themselves remain distinct: representation of the object and questions related to its existence respectively.
kalon' as 'beauty' in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Neither 'noble' nor 'fine' bears the association with the fitting that 'beauty' does, and they therefore seem inadequate. The fair' is more plausible, as it suggests the just, which has an association with the fitting, but the aesthetic connotations of 'the fair' might be lost to an English reader in this context. I don’t, however, need to rule out other possible translations in order to make my argument for beauty as a formal cause of virtue or virtuous action; I need only be allowed that it makes sense to translate 'to kalon' as 'the beautiful' if 'the beautiful' is understood to refer to the fitting and if the concept of the fitting has purchase in the context of ethics. Establishing the second of these conditions is now our task, and Aristotle will continue to be our guide in this matter. Taking up the understanding of beauty as a matter of fit was the first step. As we now go on to consider that for Aristotle acting well involves acting in a way that is fitting or appropriate to a given situation, we will begin to see the connection between a certain kind of beauty and a certain kind of ethics.

4    Beauty and Ethics in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

The concept of the fitting plays a significant role in Aristotle's ethics. Both what we might describe as the 'internal' and 'external' alignment of the agent bear on her virtue. By internal alignment, I mean what Rogers calls “the harmony of the soul” (356). Rogers points us to Aristotle’s endorsement of the Platonic hierarchy of the soul: Aristotle describes a hierarchy whereby “the element that possesses reason” takes precedence over the life of nourishment and growth and the life of sentience (*NE* 10098a). The virtuous soul, then, is one in which each element stands in fitting relation to the others, a fitting relation that for Aristotle is hierarchical.

I disagree with Aristotle about the priority of reason in human life, for what Aristotle takes to be the life of reason and the life of sentience are not necessarily easily separated, though this objection takes us into metaphysical territory and off our current track. Nevertheless, I take

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37 Although Lear begins her essay “Aristotle on Moral Virtue and the Fine” by pointing to the lack of reference to beauty in moral philosophy, she advocates for the translation of to kalon as ‘the fine,’ not ‘the beautiful,’ on the basis of the association of to kalon with the good in Aristotle, an association she feels is reflected in ‘the fine’ and is no longer carried by the word ‘beauty’ (117). I, however, have argued that it is not uncommon to associate ‘beauty’ with the good, partly following points Lear herself makes in her “Response to Kosman.” Given ‘beauty’’s capacity to connote the good, and given that ‘the fine’ has no association with the fitting, ‘the fine’ seems a weaker translation. Lear herself often reverts to speaking of beauty even within the essay in which she advocate for using ‘the fine.’
Aristotle’s point about the pertinence of the agent’s internal alignment when it comes to ethics. Rather than follow Aristotle’s understanding of such alignment, however, which hinges on a hierarchy that places mind above body, I will hearken to Jan Zwicky’s description of internal alignment. It comes up in the context of Zwicky’s response to Simone Weil’s claim that “[t]o know that this human being who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself” (“Imagination and the Good Life” 54). Following Weil, Zwicky describes sensitivity to the contours of a given situation as demanding a certain response. What is of interest for us here is the cost she describes when one fails to respond in the way that one sees is called for by the situation (of the really existing hungry person): “The price is, always, a loss of integrity, an absence of interior attunement” (19). Although Zwicky is not subscribing to an Aristotelian hierarchy, she nevertheless points to interior integration and attunement as part of ethical responsiveness and as sacrificed when one turns away from the palpable ethical demands of the really existing, hungry human one has perceived. When one feels the need to respond and does not respond, one’s interior attunement has lapsed. What one feels one should do and what one does are not coordinated. The self’s felt need to respond to the hungry human has gone untended by the self; aspects of the self are thus out of tune.

Turning back to Aristotle, the second way in which fitting relations are critical to ethics is in terms of external alignment, which will be my primary focus in what follows. By ‘external alignment,’ I mean the agent’s relation to the world, i.e. to the other beings among which/whom he moves. Weil’s agent is externally aligned with the hungry person who forms part of that agent’s world. Rather than seeing virtue as a matter of following a set of rules determined through some ethically sound means à la Kant, Aristotle emphasizes sensitivity to particular circumstances and the need for action to be appropriate to or fitting with those circumstances.

Consider, for instance, the following passage:

38 There are of course strong ties between internal and external alignment. Zwicky’s claim is that a lack of external alignment means a corresponding lack of internal alignment, and this seems a sound observation. The link is there in Aristotle too: to be virtuous in character (to be internally aligned) means having virtuous feelings and taking virtuous action, and the virtuousness of those feelings or actions depends on my external alignment in the sense that they must be appropriate to circumstance. Nevertheless, there is to be found in Aristotle a distinction between the structure of one’s character and the structure of one’s relations with others in the world, and it is a revealing distinction so long as we don’t forget the intertwining of these different forms of alignment.
...the spheres of actions and of what is good for us, like those of health, have nothing fixed about them. Since the general account lacks precision, the account at the level of particulars is even less precise. For they do not come under any skill or set of rules: agents must always look at what is appropriate in each case as it happens, as do doctors and navigators. (*NE* 1104a).

On this view, acting well is not or is not entirely a matter of rule-following but instead depends on a grasp of “what is appropriate” or fitting to a given case. Acting ethically requires sensitivity to the particularities of a given situation so that one can act in a way that fits or is appropriate to those particularities. Take for instance, my recent visit to a friend who has a new baby and with whom I have just spent several days in order to provide support and care. Consider her tiredness: while I was staying with her, I had to be tuned into her, attentive, so that I could tell how tired she was at a given moment. Even when I could tell that her tiredness was weighing on her, there was no obvious rule for addressing her in her tiredness. In one instance of tiredness she needed a shoulder rub, but in another a hand on a shoulder made her feel too close to tears. She sometimes needed to talk about how tired she was, sometimes needed me to get her a glass of water, sometimes needed to laugh, sometimes just needed company in her tiredness, someone close by. It depended on the moment, and rather than follow a rule for dealing with a new mother or for addressing tiredness, I spent my time being as alert to her situation as I could, attempting to match my response to her state as well as I could.

The situation of a caretaker is one in which the need to be attuned to particular needs and to what is fitting in a given instance is particularly easy to see, but Aristotle’s argument is that attention to the particularities of concrete situations is always ethically advisable: “[...]though more general discussions of actions are of wider application, particular ones are more genuine. This is because actions are to do with particulars, and what we say should accord with particulars” (*NE* 1107a). And later again, in discussion of equity and justice, we find Aristotle arguing for flexibility in laws because about some things it is impossible to legislate, so that a special decree is required. For when the object is indeterminate, so also is the rule, like the leaden rule of Lesbian architecture. Just as this rule adapts to fit the shape of the stone and does not remain rigid, so the special decree adapts to fit the circumstances (*NE* 1137b).
Here too, we find that sensitivity to fit—in this case of the law—with particular circumstances is critical to ethics. The circumstances are primary and the law secondary; the law must be appropriate, must fit the circumstances. As Aristotle later says, “universals are arrived at from particulars” (1143b). He argues that if the fit between law and circumstances is off, the law must adapt.

In discussion of feelings in relation to virtue, Aristotle expresses a similar need for sensitivity to what is appropriate or fitting to a given situation. In order to be virtuous, one must find an apt fit between one’s feelings and the situation at hand. One must have feelings (such as fear, confidence, anger and pity) “at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way” (NE 1106b). Anyone who has worked for a boss who, frustrated with one person, barks at another, will see what Aristotle is getting at here—the boss’s frustration toward the blameless employee is out of key and creates an ethically problematic relation between them, a misalignment. But there is some question as to whether we can be held responsible for feelings (my frustration) or only for our handling of those feelings (my taking out of my frustration on someone inappropriate). It’s not clear how much control we can have over our feelings, so I am less inclined to embrace this aspect of Aristotle’s call to alignment than I am others. Nevertheless, there is a grace in feeling appropriate emotions and a clumsiness in feeling inappropriate emotions—there’s something out of key about feeling pity for a child who is playing alone when that child is happy as a clam; pity is inapt. And there is at least one sense in which I may have some agency in regard to my feelings, for inapt feelings are often tied to failures of perception—the failure to see that the child is happy, that the employee is blameless and working well. We can learn to be more perceptually acute, more sensitive to the beings around us, and this makes it more likely both that our feelings will be apt and that we will participate beautifully in our environment, in key with its other elements.

Given that for Aristotle ethical action depends on agents considering what is appropriate or fitting in each case, and given his association of beauty with what is fitting—an association that shows up in the ethics, though it doesn’t take the strong form of synonymity that it does in the Topics—we are in a position to make sense of the perhaps initially puzzling claim that “actions done in accordance with virtue are beautiful and done for the sake of the beautiful [to kalon]” (NE 1120a23). To act well is to act fittingly, and to act fittingly is to act beautifully. The first
part of the claim is now clear: virtuous actions are beautiful insofar as they are fitting. What of the second part of the claim, that virtuous actions are done “for the sake of” the beautiful?

Aristotle’s ethics are virtue-focussed, and the virtues, he says, “are states of character” (NE 1143b). The virtuous agent is primarily directed toward being a certain kind of person—one who responds appropriately to circumstances: courageously when and to the degree appropriate, with pity when and to the degree appropriate, etc. (NE 1106b). I become virtuous by adopting virtuous attitudes and pursuing virtuous actions, i.e. ones that are appropriate or fitting to each situation in which I find myself. As John Milliken puts it in his interpretation of to kalon as the for-the-sake-of-which of virtuous action, “the virtuous agent chooses the actions she does because they have a certain shape, or form...[she] engage[s] in certain actions because of the structure they exhibit” (324).

One way of conceiving of the structure of virtuous action is by thinking back to Aristotle’s claim that “agents must always look at what is appropriate in each case as it happens” (NE 1104a). On this line of thinking, the structure of virtuous action is that of fitting or appropriate relatedness to a given case, of sound alignment of self with/in situation. I engage in a particular action because it is fitting to do so, because it creates a structure in which I am appropriately related to another or others, because to act in this way is to participate aptly in a relational whole of some description. I act because this action is beautiful, in the sense we have discussed.

Milliken’s discussion leans on Rogers’ interpretation of the relation of virtue and to kalon in Aristotle, so let us turn again to Rogers. Having completed a canvas of Aristotle’s frequent associations of both virtue and to kalon with the fitting, she concludes that:

[1]These statements suggest that what renders virtue kalon is its complete appropriateness. Thus to describe a virtuous act as kalon is, at the literal level, to say that it is fully medial and appropriate, occurring at the right time, about the right thing, towards the right people, and so forth. It may not be amiss to say that to kalon in this sense functions as the formal cause of virtue, for Aristotle links it with the mean in which virtue formally
This last sentence is of interest: we might not be wrong to think of *to kalon* as the formal cause of virtue. This is an idea I will pursue, although Rogers appeals to the mean, which I have not discussed. I follow Rosalind Hursthouse in her arguments that Aristotle’s so-called “Doctrine of the Mean” makes no useful contribution to his discussion of ethics (180-1). The connection between the appropriate and the mean in Aristotle is far from clear. He says about feelings such as fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity, etc. that “to have them at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end and in the right way is the mean and best; and this is the business of virtue” (*NE* 1106b). The claim is that to take up an appropriate attitude toward a situation is to hit the mean, which is to be virtuous. But how is feeling feelings (and taking action) “at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end and in the right way” to hit the mean? How is adopting the right attitude at the right time, about the right things, etc. quantifiable as a middle ground between excess and deficiency? The answer to this question is not obvious, and Rosalind Hursthouse argues convincingly that the doctrine of the mean adds nothing to what she calls Aristotle’s “central doctrine” that “our target is to act and feel ‘on the right occasions, about/with respect to the right things, with respect to the right people, for the right reasons, in the right way or manner.’” (105).

In considering *to kalon* qua the appropriate as the formal cause of virtue, Rogers might appeal to the mean because of the quasi-spatial character of the concept. As a mid-point, the mean has an obvious structural character. It thus lends itself easily to discussion of form. But considering *to kalon* as a formal cause of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* need not involve appeal to the mean. The concept of the appropriate is itself enough to count as a formal or structural specification of the relations one creates or maintains within a given situation. If we turn back to Milliken, we see that he does not refer to the mean, nor does he use the term “formal cause,” but a formal cause—engaging in actions because of their formal structure—is what he describes. In Aristotelian ethics, he says, *to kalon* is that which gives us “a formal specification of the actions

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39 Rogers footnotes this suggestion with a discussion of the question of the priority of the mean over *to kalon*, tentatively concluding that neither concept is ultimately prior (357n9).
the virtuous agent chooses. The virtuous agent chooses the actions she does because they have a certain shape or form” (424).

Even without the concept of the mean we can see that for Aristotle a virtuous action is one that is appropriate to circumstances and thus has the form of to kalon, the beautiful. What’s required to see to kalon as the formal cause of virtue or virtuous action is an understanding of appropriate relations as structural in the sense of representing a sound alignment of self within the world. When one’s action creates or maintains such alignment between self and world, when what’s done fits into what’s called for, the action has a beautiful structure. In this sense, beauty is the formal cause of virtuous action and of the virtue to which virtuous action gives rise.

Of course Aristotle’s discussion of causation takes place primarily in the Physics and the Metaphysics, not in the Ethics. This may explain Milliken’s choice to refrain from speaking explicitly in terms of formal cause. We must proceed with caution in translating the language of causation from the contexts of the Physics and Metaphysics to that of the Ethics, in which Aristotle does not discuss formal causation per se. We must not attribute to him more than he says in the Ethics. Nevertheless, he does claim that virtue is “for the sake of beauty,” which brings causation into the picture. And as indicated by Rogers’ tentative suggestion that we think of beauty as a formal cause of virtue, bringing the concept of the formal cause to bear in the realm of ethics may illuminate the relations between beauty and virtue. I am not arguing that Aristotle’s claim just is that beauty is the formal cause of virtue. I do, however, present formal causation as a helpful way of approaching what he does say, as an illumination of the relation between the two.

In order to dig deeper into this relation, we might pause and think more deeply about what a formal cause is exactly. In the Physics Aristotle speaks of a cause as the answer to the question “on account of what?” (II 3 194b 20). He then identifies the formal cause as “what the being would be” (II 3 195a 21). The formal cause of virtue is “what virtue would be.” What would virtue be? As we have seen, it would be appropriate relations, internal and external, i.e. beauty. It is in this way that beauty appears as the formal cause of virtue. The formal cause is, of course, tightly bound up with the final cause or the end: “What a thing is, and what it is for, are one and the same,” says Aristotle (Physics II 7 25-6). A thing “would be” (form) what it is aimed at
being (end). In the case of ethical action as we have been conceiving of it, the action “would be” beautiful and is also aimed at beauty. Indeed, Aristotle’s language at times suggests beauty as final cause rather than formal; we already have seen the passage in which he describes beauty as “the end toward which virtue is directed [tou to kalon]” (NE 1105a30, quoted and translated by Kosman, 342).

Yet how can beauty be the telos of virtue when the Nicomachean Ethics opens with an account of eudaimonia (happiness) as the for-the-sake-of-which of virtue? We might, on account of this conflict, be inclined to speak of beauty as formal cause of virtue—as what gives virtue or virtuous action its structure—and of happiness as the final cause. But this is not so much a matter of distinguishing formal and final causes as it is of understanding the relation of beauty and happiness [eudemonia]. Milliken is helpful in this regard. For readers will recall that in the Nicomachean Ethics there are in fact three different claims about the end of virtuous action: one chooses virtuous actions “for their own sake” (1105a30), “for the sake of happiness [eudaimonia]” (1102a2-4) and for the sake of the beautiful: “actions done in accordance with virtue are beautiful and done for the sake of the beautiful [to kalon]” (1120a23). Following Milliken’s interpretation, virtuous action is part of happiness, so to choose for the sake of one is to choose for the sake of the other (322). Happiness, he further contends, is “a somewhat formal concept lacking in definite content” (323). The concept of to kalon, he says, provides a more determinate account of what kinds of actions constitute happiness (323). On his account of to kalon those actions turn out to be fitting, orderly, harmonious and functional (324).

It is a little odd to speak of a formal structure as providing content, but in the case of the concept of happiness, describing the structure of a constitutive action (or in my terms, the relation created or maintained through/as action) does indeed provide more content. Beauty, then, is a part of happiness insofar as it is the structure of the action that is itself a part of happiness. Does this make it a final as well as a formal cause of virtue or virtuous action? Perhaps. I leave this matter for others to decide; I am content to refer to beauty as a formal cause in order to highlight the way in which beauty refers to the structure or shape of relations created or maintained through/as virtuous action. To go back to Weil’s example, I feed the hungry person because it is fitting to do so, because to do so is to be well-aligned with that person and to be well-aligned internally too, having grasped the appropriateness of this action. When we understand beauty as a matter of
such a structure of relations, as a matter of fit, we have uncovered a relation between beauty and ethics such that beauty can be characterized as the formal cause of virtuous action.

5 Eaton’s Approach to Form in Relation to Ethics

In “Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?” Marcia Eaton describes several views that present aesthetics as prior to ethics, among them the view that endorses what she calls “the formalistic priority” of aesthetics to ethics (361). Although Eaton focusses on aesthetics in general rather than on beauty particularly, she includes claims about the relation of beauty and ethics as instances of claims about the relation of aesthetics and ethics, and although her scope is larger than mine, the claims I make about the relation of beauty to ethics fall under her purview. It is also true that I am not here concerned with arguing for the priority of beauty to ethics, but we might nevertheless pause to consider how Eaton characterizes the “formalistic priority” view, for it involves an account of form that is different from the one I am presenting here, and the contrast will help to illuminate my use of the concept.40

The formalistic priority Eaton considers is inspired by Michel Foucault and Charles Altieri. She refers to an interview in which Foucault suggests that we think of a life as a work of art and considers the differences between moralities of antiquity and those of Christianity as differences in “style” of liberty (358). Eaton uses this interview as a jumping off point, asking us to “suppose that one choose the form one's life should take before deciding upon the content” such that “which patterns and which codes [one follows] is not as important as the fact that one exhibits the style appropriate to patterned or coded behaviour” (358). Something like this, she says, is proposed by Altieri, whom she describes as arguing that “expressive patterns constitute a grammar for action and for evaluation of action” (359). She then correctly points out that describing ethical life as a matter of choosing a code before a content41 is a reductio ad

40 It’s also worth noticing that although Eaton refers to Aristotle’s theory of art and briefly to his ethics, noting his claim that we learn to act well by imitating the good actions of others, she doesn’t refer to his claim that virtue is “for the sake of beauty [to kalon],” yet it can easily be read as a claim for the priority of beauty to virtue (NE 1120a23). To say that virtue is for the sake of beauty is a claim that beauty is a cause of virtue, which might suggest that beauty is in some sense logically prior to virtue. The possibility of such a reading means that interpretation of Aristotle’s claim bears discussion in an exploration such as Eaton’s.

41 One may wonder whether Eaton’s description of Altieri’s view is accurate, but this is a question we don’t need to
“absurdum: “it is impossible to understand what it is for something to have the form of a code without understanding concepts such as the function of a code, which ultimately requires general and probably specific ethical concepts” (359). She then distances Foucault and Altieri from this view, which turns out to have been that of a straw man, but I raise this version of formalistic priority so that what I propose is not confused with it.

First, I am not claiming that content “is not as important as” form. Content, if we think of it as the specificities of a given situation—this pregnant lady's apparent exhaustion as she gets on this bus in this heat—is critical. For the particularistic style of ethics on which I am focussed, the notion of appropriate relations is effectively meaningless without particular relatees in a particular context, because appropriateness is determined through attention to those relatees within their context; when it comes to determining what counts as fitting relations, form depends on content. What I am claiming, however, is that within a particular situation, my response aims at fitting myself well into that situation.

Second, I'm not proposing a relation of aesthetics to ethics whereby I first present myself “formally” as a code-follower (aesthetics) then choose a code, i.e. adopt content (ethics). I'm rather describing an ethics—a “code” if you will, though the point is that I am situation-focussed rather than code-focussed—whereby I as agent aim at appropriate or beautiful relations such that beauty is the formal cause of my actions, for my actions are geared toward establishing or maintaining beautiful relations.

Eaton and I conceive of the formal relation of aesthetics and ethics in different ways, but in other ways we are not so very far apart. With regard to her own view of the relation between aesthetics and ethics, there are significant similarities between her “Conceptual Interdependence” account and my account. In an Aristotelian move, Eaton claims that a mature moral person's action must have both appropriate style and content (361). I agree, and have called such action
'beautiful' in virtue of its appropriateness to circumstance. Eaton also hearkens to the need to be sensitive to the concrete particulars of a situation such that one can discern what appropriate action might be, and I have done likewise. She also notes the importance of fit to ethical action, writing that all kinds of art have something to offer ethics because “attention to fit and implications challenges one to attend closely to a variety of elements, and challenges one to develop powers of perception, reflection and imagination” (362). She describes ethical life, furthermore, as a matter of “making judgements such as 'This situation calls for bold action' or 'This situation calls for subtlety’” (362-3). To have a sense of what is called for is to have a sense of fit—a sense of beauty.

The significant difference between Eaton and I lies in how we conceive of form and its relation to action. Eaton claims that a mature moral person's action “must have both appropriate style [form] and content” (361). Her thought here seems to be that both what I do and how I do it are pertinent to the ethical value of an action: in discussion of the Aristotelian process of becoming virtuous, she says that “[b]ecoming virtuous involves not just imitating what good people do—it involves...attempting to copy the way they do it” and she later observes that “we have to pay attention to the tone with which something is said as well as to the content” (362). Her notion of form, then, refers to how an action is accomplished, and she is right that it bears on the ethical value of the action. When a pregnant woman steps onto the crowded bus, do I offer her my seat grudgingly or warmly? Do I do it quietly or make a show of it? The style of the offering makes a difference to its appropriateness, and Eaton and I agree that to act ethically requires acting appropriately.

My use of 'form' in this chapter, however, is different from Eaton's; in a sense, it includes both what she calls 'form' and 'content.' Where she refers to 'form' to draw attention to the way in which an action is done, I am referring not so much to the way in which the action is done as to the character or shape of the relation(s) that it either creates or maintains. I am talking about the form of the whole of which the action is a part. I am pointing to a second-order form, if you will: an action, composed of both Eatonian form and content, is part of a larger context of relatedness, and it is to the “form” of this whole that I am drawing attention in discussion of Aristotle.
It may be useful to illustrate the difference in perspective and in terminology via the example of encountering the pregnant woman on the bus. In Eaton's terms, an action can have appropriate form and lack appropriate content: I could be appropriately warm in my gesture toward the pregnant woman but offer her money rather than a seat, in which case the content is inappropriate, unfitting. In my terms, however, if the “content” is out of key—I offer money rather than a seat—and the action is hence inappropriately aligned with/in its context, the beauty of the whole (consisting of me, the pregnant lady and perhaps the other passengers and even the bus itself) is disrupted. The form is awry.

My contention is that an agent aims at creating or maintaining an appropriate relation or relational whole consisting of the agent and aspect(s) of that agent's world. The agent could be said to aim at appropriate relation in the same way that the sculptor aims to create a statue of a certain shape, to use Aristotle's example (Physics II 3). Formally, “what it is to be” an ethically sound relational whole is to be one in which participants exist in fitting relation, and “what it is to be” an ethically good participant is to create or maintain fitting relations. Appropriate relations are the form I seek to create or maintain through/as ethical actions. It is in this sense that beauty can be said to be the formal cause of ethical action (whether this amounts to priority is another issue). What exactly constitutes “appropriate” relations will vary from case to case—actions different in both Eatonian form and content may be differently appropriate in different situations—but in each case the form of the relations I seek remains the beauty of appropriateness, of sound alignment.

Eaton's understanding of the relations conceivable between aesthetics and ethics seems to be limited by insufficient attention to the human agent as participant in a larger whole. Although she acknowledges, quoting Marcia Cavell, that “neither aesthetic nor moral judgments concern themselves with ‘an object or event in isolation from the environment and other events,’” she tends to consider aesthetics as pertaining either to circumstances to which I attend using aesthetic skills or to the characteristics of my life qua artwork; she neglects to think of aesthetic features as belonging to a relation or set of relations that includes me as participant (362). So it is that she

\[\text{42 I'm using “aspects of a world” to refer either to another being or to multiple beings and their respective relations.}\]
tends not to speak of ethical life in terms of the creation or maintenance of a beautiful relational whole of some kind, nor does she speak of ethical action as having aesthetic aims or aesthetic ends. She notes that ethical living requires “attention to fit,” an exigency about which we agree, but doesn't describe one's actions in seeking to create or maintain fit as guided by an aesthetic aim. Though she mentions the imagination, she does not adequately investigate the work of the imagination in envisioning an appropriately related whole that stands as the aim of one's action(s) (and attitude(s) if one is taking an Aristotelian tack). She notices that I exercise aesthetic skill in determining what's called for, but not that the very idea of a what's-called-for has a formal aesthetic character that refers to the structure or shape of appropriate relations in a given situation. In Aristotelian language, beauty qua fitting relations is the formal cause of virtue and virtuous action.

6 Objections to Thinking of Virtue and Virtuous Action as Beautiful

6.1 Counter-Examples

In considering limitations on thinking of beauty as a formal cause of virtue and of virtuous action, I will first address Kosman’s claim that it is strange to translate to kalon as ‘the beautiful’ rather than as ‘the noble’ in the case of the Hippias Major, in which Plato refers to burying one’s parents and being buried by one’s children as to kalon (346). Although the Platonic dialogues are not our current concern, the example is relevant to the question of how it is that beauty fits into an ethical context, and a similar objection could be raised in other cases—cases such as the self-immolation of Tibetan monks in protest of the imposition of Chinese rule upon Tibet. Most recently (i.e. as I write) Losang Dawa and Kunchok Woser have set themselves on fire in protest (Free Tibet). Perhaps there is a way in which the flames of these burning bodies could be found beautiful in the art-critically formal sense of being a spectacle of colour and light, but it’s suitably difficult to divorce these visual qualities from the monks’ suffering, from the charred and blackening flesh, which is inapt in a deep sense—not an experience appropriate to a human being. So these life-ending gestures can be seen as lacking beauty in the sense in which I have been using the term. Yet assuming one believes the monks’ cause to be just, the gestures are ethical. It seems, then, that these self-immolations stand as counter-examples to my claim that ethical relations and the actions that forge or maintain them are beautiful.
To take Kosman’s example first, I agree that to refer to these burials as beautiful is indeed strange if we are restricted to an understanding of beauty as pertaining purely to appearances. But I have already shown that there is reason to think of beauty in another way, as referring to fitting relation. If we consider these burials as an appropriate part of the rhythm of human life, as fitting into that rhythm and hence as beautiful, speaking of beauty sounds less strange.

Lear, for her part, agrees with Kosman that reference to the beauty in this case is odd, but claims that this is not because the act of burial is not beautiful but because “its beauty ought to be a trivial concern” (362). She may be partly right: taking the large view I have proposed is not always appropriate. From an individual’s point of view, the loss of a relative is just that, a loss, a hole in her world, and in that sense it is not beautiful; it is a tear in the fabric of her life. But in the sense that the burial is a fitting part of the rhythm of human life, it is beautiful, and this beauty is not trivial, even if the event also has less-than-beautiful aspects such that at times grief is more appropriate than tuning into the larger scale beauty of such events.

Something similarly complex is the case in instances such as the self-immolation of the Tibetan monks. As I have suggested above, one might think that this too is a case in which an ethical response is not beautiful. Certainly there is an aspect of this gesture that is not beautiful: burning alive is profoundly unbefitting of any creature. There is self-violation in this gesture of suffering, and in that sense the act shows a lack of alignment. But assuming that we think the monks are ethically right in their action, there is yet a sense in which the gesture is beautiful: as an apt response to an oppressive regime. It is a beautiful response to or within an ugly situation, beautiful in the sense that the monks are externally aligned with that situation: what’s called for is protest, and that is what they do. The monks, furthermore, appear to be well-aligned internally, reveal what Zwicky calls “interior attunement.” They have found a way to respond to the situation at hand while adhering to their tenet of pacifism. The self-immolation of the monks is not perfectly beautiful insofar as such violence to the self is questionably apt; even when it is apt in the sense of fitting the need to protest, it remains inapt in the sense of being inapt to their pain-sensitive, sentient selves. The inaptness of this self-violence is, of course, the essence of the protest. Nevertheless, insofar as the monks are aligned with the situation and aligned internally in the sense that their actions do not violate their principles, there is a beauty in their gestures.
In both of the cases described above, if the characterization of virtue and virtuous action as beautiful is limited, it is not limited in the sense that virtue and virtuous action are not beautiful, only in the sense that an action may be aligned in one sense and misaligned in another, ethical and beautiful in one sense and ethically imperfect and imperfectly beautiful in another. It remains the case that insofar as an action is ethical qua fitting, it is beautiful qua fitting.

What of the contrasting kind of case, that of the response that is somehow fitting but not ethically good? We might, for instance, consider the truism that no one can hurt you like the one who loves you. The idea is that someone can know you so well that he knows exactly where to dig the knife and when to twist it. His act is, in a sense, fitted to your vulnerabilities. He may know, for instance, that you doubt your intelligence, and this “lover” can capitalize on your doubt, deliberately making you feel bad, even in subtle ways—perhaps by asking someone else to spell a word rather than asking you, thus inviting you to feel unworthy of consultation. There is a way in which his undermining action is fitting, is in a sense an aligned response to your vulnerability. Insofar as the response is in this sense fitting, it could be said to be beautiful, but it clearly isn’t ethically sound.

There is in fact no need to address such cases here, for my claim is not that all fitting responses are ethically good but that all ethically good responses are fitting. But it may yet be worth observing that descriptions of fitting-but-ethically-poor responses tend to depend on an exceedingly narrow view of the being to which/whom one responds. As in the previous cases, the situation of the harm-inflicting lover is ultimately more complex than the description I have provided so far. His act is and is not aligned with your weakness: it fits in the sense that it is tailored to that weakness, but it doesn’t fit in the sense that your doubt calls for care, is an injury that calls to be healed in virtue of your interest in emotional and intellectual wellbeing. The act is fitting only in a very narrow sense, one that doesn’t take account of the full character of either your weakness or of your personhood, your interest in emotional and intellectual wellbeing. Indeed, it is on account of this lack of fit—this lack of beauty—from a more holistic perspective that we call the act unethical; the fitting remains associated with the ethical.
6.2 Alterity-Based Ethics

Some alterity-focused ethicists, however, might still not be content with an account of ethics as involving a sense of the beautiful qua fitting, may reject it and look instead to the concept of the sublime as having ethical significance. Most alterity-focused ethics are rooted in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, and following his line of thought, a supposedly “ethical” or virtuous response stemming from and guided by a sense of beauty qua the fitting could be unethical in one of three ways:

1. It may effectively subsume the Other to the Same, thereby reducing her, violating what Levinas takes to be her “absolutely foreign character” (TI 73). The notion of fitting action, it may be objected, presumes that the Other is somehow discernable, intelligible to me such that I can see what fitting action is. But Levinas insists on the ethical importance of experiencing the otherness of the Other, the “infinite distance of the stranger” (TI 50). The crucial ethical moment is the moment of address, he says, which is accomplished by the face of the Other, “the face” being defined as “the way in which the [O]ther presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me” (TI 50, italics his). The Other exceeds whatever idea of him I have, exists beyond every quality I might assign him: “[h]e is a being beyond attributes” (“The I and the Totality” 33). To assign him any attribute would be “to reduce him to what is common to him and other beings” (TI 74). He is “refractory to every typology, to every genus, to every characterology, to every classification” (TI 73). The problem this line of thought presents for the account of ethics I am providing is that in attempting to attend to the Other such that I can discern what response may be fitting, I am likely characterizing her as bearing attributes—attributes to which my response can fit itself. And the Levinasian concern is that to assign attributes is to violate Otherness, disrupting the fundamental ethical encounter. There thus seems to be a way in which conceiving of ethical response as beautiful in the sense of fitting privileges belonging over not belonging,

43Levinas’ account is restricted to ethics pertaining to the social world, and his thinking doesn’t lend itself easily to a more environmental approach to ethics because of his description of the character of things, a matter I can’t go into here. I suggest, however, that non-human elements of the environment can be among those that situate us ethically by means of address; we have only to imagine a form of bodily address that calls for a response, though the address is not made through a literal face. Those interested in pursuing this line of thought might consult Don McKay’s essay “The Bushtits’ Nest.”
sameness over otherness, and is thus not truly ethical from a Levinasian point of view. From this perspective the beauty-based “ethics” I have proposed may look like a species of fascism. In light of this objection, the concept of the sublime—as that which I cannot encompass and which has a power that is beyond me—may seem a more appropriate aesthetic concept to associate with ethics than the beautiful qua the fitting.

2. The second objection might go something like this: description of ethical action as beautiful in the sense of fitting is inadequate, for it suggests that an action that does not or will not or cannot fit a situation—i.e. an action that is not beautiful—is not ethical. My approach appears to neglect the possibility of an ethical action that exceeds the confines of the fitting, and the agent focussed on the fitting will hence be blind to the ethical possibilities offered by a somehow excessive action. This objection is related to the counter-example-based objection discussed above—to the self-immolating monks and the burial of one’s parents—for both objections point toward actions that are ethical but might not be beautiful.

3. A third objection might focus on the premise that infinite responsibility is called for by the address of the Other. According to Levinas, the face reveals to me a person’s absolute vulnerability and places me in a position of absolute, unending responsibility to him: “before the Other, the I is infinitely responsible” (“T&H” 18). No response is adequate to the task; more is always called for. The Levinasian ethical concept of the infinite might thus seem to oppose that of the fitting, which suggests the finitude of a puzzle piece falling into place, of a defined, i.e. limited, response that fits the parameters of the situation. The position I have described might appear to assume the possibility of adequate response, which the Levinasian ethic refuses. On the puzzle-piece model, only action that can be brought under what Levinas identifies as the domain of the same will count as ethical, and that is not obviously acceptable to the Levinasian.

What can be said to address these objections? We might begin by noticing the compatibility of the Levinasian ethic with the Aristotelian emphasis on the outstripping of ethical principles by particulars. As we have seen, Aristotle argues that particular circumstances exceed the bounds of principle-based theories; they are in this sense other, excessive, unencompassable by an idea. He writes, for instance, that “how far and to what extent someone must deviate [from the right degree] before becoming blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reason, because nothing
perceived by our senses is easily determined; such things are particulars, and judgement about them lies in perception” (*NE* 1109b). Aristotle thus recommends paying attention to what we might call the “otherness” of particulars with regard to principles, and he is in this way like Levinas. His argument is not grounded in encounter with the fundamental Otherness of Others as Levinas’ is, but he nevertheless resists reducing any unique being to “what is common,” as Levinas insists we must avoid doing to the Other (*TI* 74). We could even say that it is the excessive or “sublime” character of particulars with regard to principles that prompts Aristotle’s attention to beautiful i.e. fitting response. Aristotle and Levinas, then, may be more complementary than it might seem at first glance--but of course, this similarity does not of itself dissolve the objections described above.

1. With regard to the first objection: it’s true that the ethical action with the form of beauty depends, as I have been describing it, on “reading” a situation—discerning that the pregnant woman boarding the bus may need a seat and that it is fitting for me to give her mine. If Levinasian ethics insists that she is Other to the point of unreadable as pregnant and probably finding standing difficult, it isn’t much use when it comes to figuring out how to relate to other people. Yet there is something important in Levinas’ insight into the ethical significance of the strangeness of Others, which has its source in their freedom—it is in virtue of his freedom that the Other is beyond my epistemological grasp (*TI* 73). And it is conceivable that this insight could be compatible with the ethic I have described if we think of the recognition of freedom-based strangeness as revealing to us that it is fitting to be ever-open to being surprised by the Other—open to the possibility that the woman who looks like she’s struggling and tired might not want to sit, for instance. Open to the Other’s possible exceeding of my idea of her.

This suggestion may be unacceptable to a hard-core Levinasian, however, for such a person might want to insist on this exceeding not as a possibility but as an ethical given, and might further argue that replacing one attribute with another is still to violate her Otherness. This extreme approach is incompatible with mine, unless we consider that reduction of the Other to

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44 “And it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me—refractory to every typology, to every genus, to every characterology, to every classification—and consequently the term of a ‘knowledge’ finally penetrating beyond the object. The strangeness of the Other, his very freedom!” writes Levinas (*TI* 73).
the Same is inappropriate, unfitting. We might then say that what is fitting before the strangeness of the Other is to respect the strangeness of the Other, not to trespass upon it. In this sense the two apparently different approaches to ethics—the one that emphasizes appropriate response and the one that emphasizes experience of Otherness—are compatible. But I repeat that I find conceiving of Others as absolutely strange ethically problematic, given that this means I can’t assign the Other attributes such as pregnant-and-probably-requiring-a-seat. Recognition of limits on what we can know of Others is apt given that we are otherwise in danger of stripping them of their freedom. But as I have said above, it is because of this freedom or strangeness that I offer the pregnant woman my seat, giving her the option of refusing. Because she is not utterly knowable to me and I could be wrong in assigning her the attribute of needing-a-seat, I make my gesture in an open-ended way. It is in this sense that the ethical approach I am proposing and that of Levinas meet. I try to attend to others such that my responses are apt, but part of responding aptly is staying open to the possibility of being mistaken about what my attention reveals, given the Otherness of Others.

2. With regard to the second objection, we can observe that if a situation can be addressed by an excessive action, that action is nevertheless fitting insofar as it is well-suited to the situation, is what seems to be called for. Here we might consider exactly what might constitute an excessive act. In so doing we may look to Derrida, who argues that forgiveness is excessive: “forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible” (32, italics his). Forgiveness or a gesture of forgiveness is excessive in the sense that no one can require forgiveness, no one can claim forgiveness as their due. What is forgiven, says Derrida, is precisely the unforgiveable (32). To forgive is thus to exceed the bounds of what can be reasonably required in a given situation; it is a paradoxical act. No one can require me to forgive the unforgiveable.

This may be true, but even if forgiveness is excessive in this sense, it may yet be apt, fitting. If we look to Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of Seneca’s argument for mercy in justice, we can see how this is so. I will go into Nussbaum’s argument in more detail in chapter five, but for the moment it will suffice to note that according to Nussbaum mercy is defined by Seneca as an inclination toward leniency in punishment. This is an attitude that, like forgiveness, we may be inclined to characterize as excessive in the sense that it cannot be required. Yet according to
Nussbaum, Seneca argues that if we consider “each particular case as a complex narrative of human effort in a world full of obstacles,” we will tend toward mercy (103). Mercy will seem apt. We might say the same of forgiveness: understanding the history of and difficulties faced by a given person as well as understanding the other complexities of a given situation can reveal the appropriateness or fittingness of “excessive” acts of forgiveness. Perhaps for Derrida this “forgiveness” is no longer truly forgiveness but something else less excessive. But insofar as forgiveness cannot be required, it is excessive, and insofar as it is it fitting, it is ethical. In this sense the excessive may be what is called for, what is fitting, in a given situation.

3. In the case of the third objection, we find that the Aristotelian-flavoured ethic of beautifully-formed, fitting response is likewise compatible with the Levinasian ethic—compatible in this instance with “sublime” infinite responsibility. Although the vulnerability of the pregnant woman’s face (and surely the rest of her body) compels me to infinite responsibility to her, presumably such infinite responsibility includes giving her my seat. As I observed above, what practical use is the Levinasian ethic if that act isn’t part of my responsibility to her? How might I engage with Others at all if they are completely opaque to me such that I cannot even rightly see that someone might need to sit down? Going back to Weil’s example of the hungry man, the Levinasian insight is that I first encounter the man’s face, which is an embodied address to me, a call to responsibility, even to infinite responsibility, as he says. I suggest that having been exposed to the man’s vulnerability (exposed to his exposure), I may then embark upon the Aristotelian activity of seeking an appropriate response to this man in his hunger, and this activity is focussed by or aimed at fitting my response to the one who has addressed me—I am, in other words, trying to respond such that the relation(s) in which I participate is/are in some way beautiful, even if the process of response is rightly without end. My relation to the man in this sense has characteristics of both the sublime and the beautiful. Furthermore, the very concept of infinite responsibility can be understood to be a fitting—i.e. a beautiful—response to the Other, just as the excessive act can be seen to be fitting. Fitting response to the other may be to take a stance of infinite responsibility toward her, responding to her out of that infinite responsibility. The Levinasian picture is in this way quite compatible with the relation of beauty to ethics that I have been discussing.
So far I have argued for thinking of beauty as the formal cause of virtue or virtuous action (to use Aristotelian language) or as part of what I aim at in creating and maintaining ethical relation(s) (to use less Aristotelian language). Some readers might be concerned, however, that I am overemphasizing the role of aesthetics in ethical life. They might worry that by focussing on aesthetics and on ethics as aiming at a certain formal character of a relational whole, I am neglecting the centrality of exposure to suffering or of vulnerability. Suffering and vulnerability, it may be argued, are non-generalizable content rather than form, and have been underrepresented in this discussion. It might also be thought that having mentioned Levinas, I have failed to see that the aim of ethical life is to be responsible to Levinas' destitute Other; one might also think that surely the aim of ethical action is to assuage the hunger of Weil's man in need more than it is to create beautiful relations. One might even say that the beauty of those relations is accidental, an epiphenomenon of ethical response.

I agree that talk of an aesthetic end or cause of ethical action can be in danger of obscuring the vulnerability of other beings, a vulnerability that accounts at least partly for the profound responsibility we bear to those others. This is why I am glad of the example of Weil's hungry man, abstract as it is—and perhaps I should really be describing wavy-haired, soft-spoken John, a client at the St. Michael’s soup kitchen where I volunteer here in Montreal, though it’s hard to speak of John without reducing him to the symbol of “hungry man,” making him Same in the way that Levinas warns against. Despite working at a fairly abstract level, however, I do acknowledge the primacy of our situation as addressees placed in a position of responsibility to others by reason of their vulnerability. The question of how best to attend to the vulnerable, how to respond to the particular being(s) that participate with me in a given situation—how to respond to John—is nevertheless a question about what an appropriate action or attitude is. It’s a question of what is a fitting response. In seeking to tend to the vulnerable man before me, I do seek to be in beautiful relation with him insofar as I aim at fitting myself and my actions to his needs, demands, tendencies, sensitivities, strengths, etc. To seek to be in beautiful relation to him just is to aim at fitting myself to his needs etc. The feeding of the hungry man in an appropriate way is a beautiful gesture (as is providing him with the means to feed himself), and I am guided in my response to him by a sense of what is appropriate, i.e. beautiful. Beauty is not accidental to the response, nor is it a consideration apart from his hunger; it is part of the structure of my
response and shapes the answer to the question of how best to address him in his hunger.

The example of feeding the hungry man is but one instance of appropriate response, and because it focuses on a man in his hunger in particular, it portrays a response that is primarily charitable and a relation that appears to be unidirectional. Of course, an appropriate response may be primarily charitable, but appropriate responses tend to be multifaceted, given that people are multifaceted; aptness of response often requires that even a response that is primarily charitable include other aspects such as solidarity and mutual support. To respond to John as hungry includes feeding him, and to do so is to respond appropriately in that regard, but other aspects of his being may call for a layered response and different dimensions of relation between him and me. Responding aptly, i.e. beautifully, is a complex affair, as complex as humans and their circumstances.

In this chapter I have focused on form, but form doesn’t exist without content. Beautiful ethical relations don’t exist without particular beings with particular needs, demands, tendencies, sensitivities, strengths, etc. I have, furthermore, shown that sensitivity to particulars—to content—is at the heart of the Aristotelian ethics on which I have drawn. Form and content work in tandem: my sense of the character of the particulars that participate in a given situation (content) determines what is fitting. And in responding to the riveting demands of concrete beings, especially to those who are suffering, a sense of beauty—of appropriate relations—shapes my response. Hunger may not be beautiful, but the relation between John and myself can be.
Chapter 5
Beauty: Analogue of Ethical Relations

1 Introduction

So far we have consider two versions of a relation between beauty and ethics. The first sees experiences of beauty as at least sometimes eliciting the decentred attention that is the foundation of the ethics of care described by Weil, Murdoch and Scarry. The second version emerges in Aristotelian ethics and sees the beautiful as the formal cause of virtue or virtuous action. Indeed, virtue or virtuous action can be said to be beautiful on this account. Both these accounts are in some sense causal, though one is a modern and one an ancient causality. In the first account beauty causes or motivates our decentring; in the second beauty causes virtue or virtuous action to have the shape or structure it does. The first describes something like efficient causality and is not teleologically driven; the second describes a formal causality where beauty is the form at which virtue or virtuous action aims.

We will now turn to a slightly different relation between beauty and ethics, that of analogy. There are at least three ways in which beauty can be seen to be analogous to the good. We will first consider Kant’s argument that beauty is a “symbol of morality.” We will then turn Elaine Scarry’s argument that beauty, insofar as it is symmetrical, provides us with a perceptible analogue of justice insofar as justice too is symmetrical. Each of these approaches, as we shall see, depends on particular understandings of beauty and of ethics. But in light of limitations that will emerge when it comes to Scarry’s account of beauty as analogue, I will propose an alternative to her account. I will describe an analogical relation of beauty to ethics that is similar to Scarry’s though also a twist on the Aristotelian relation discussed in the last chapter. I will argue that if we take a particularist approach to ethical relations and see ethical response both as a matter of fit and as beautiful insofar as it is fitting, there are also instances of beautiful fits that are not immediately ethical—the beauty of a Mondrian, of a well-made table, of a spider’s web,

45 Although analogies are traditionally described as having two parts, an ‘analogue’ or ‘source’ and a ‘target,’ I am using ‘analogue’ for both parts of the analogy because in an analogy, meaning travels in both directions; the parts are in fact mutually illuminating. For more on this claim, see p. 135-6.
of the human body. I will show how these beauties can stand as analogues of ethically fitting relation and thus help us to conceive of, to imagine such relation.

As well as investigating in what sense beauty can be seen to be an analogue of ethics, I will consider the significance of the analogical relation. For analogy might seem a more tenuous, less significant relation than the causal relations discussed in previous chapters. We will see Kant argue that the analogy is critical to making judgements of the good, though beauty may not be a cause of those judgements. Scarry, however, describes beauty as causally connected to our conception of justice through analogy, as we shall see. I will argue that something similar can be said of the analogy I propose between beauty and the fitting relations characteristic of a particularistic ethic, despite what might seem to be significant differences between the aspects of ethics on which Scarry and I focus respectively.

2 Kant: Beauty as a Symbol of Morality

In the Critique of the Power of Judgement, Kant famously distinguishes satisfaction in beauty from satisfaction in the good. As he describes it, the judgement of beauty does not involve appeal to a concept of the beautiful—at most we have an “indeterminate” concept of the beautiful, an empty concept (5:207). In the absence of a concept, the imagination and the understanding engage in a pleasurable “free play” (5:217). The satisfaction we take in this free play is the basis for the judgement of beauty. The good, by contrast, “pleases by means of reason alone, through the mere concept” (5:207). Both instrumental and intrinsic goods involve the concept of an end and a relation of reason to desire (5:207). They therefore involve my satisfaction in the existence of an object or action—which is to say, I have an “interest” in that object or action (5:207). Kant contrasts this satisfaction with the satisfaction involved in the judgement of beauty, a satisfaction “without any interest:” “[O]ne does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing” (5:204). The judgement of beauty is “merely contemplative,” has no connection to desire and takes no interest in the object as existing, only considers it in “intuition or reflection” (5:209, 5:204). So we have on the one hand the judgement of the good, interested and based on a concept, and on the other the judgement of the beautiful, disinterested and without appeal to a concept.
Given the pains that Kant initially takes to distinguish satisfaction in the beautiful from satisfaction in the good, it is perhaps surprising to find him linking beauty and morality later in the *Critique*. In §59, however, he discusses beauty “as a symbol of morality” (5:351). He maintains distinctions between beauty and morality, but now also emphasizes points of similarity. He suggests that this new move stems from a need for a way to demonstrate the reality of moral concepts and to show how they can be theoretically cognizable, despite the lack of a directly corresponding intuition (5:351). It is also a nod to the common tendency to assign beautiful objects qualities that have a moral cast to them: “even colours are called innocent, modest or tender” he observes (5:354). He is attempting to explain this propensity while also explaining how moral concepts, which lack directly corresponding intuitions, are nevertheless demonstrated to be objectively real: through a process analogical to the judgement of beauty.

The reality of the moral concept, argues Kant, is demonstrated indirectly, i.e. symbolically. He says that all presentations are either schematic or symbolic (5:351). In the case of a schematic presentation the intuition is given *a priori*. But the symbolic presentation pertains to a concept without a directly corresponding intuition. In the case of beauty and morality, an intuition from a schematizable concept (though an empty one in the case of the beautiful) is attributed to the intuitionless concept, i.e. to the moral idea. But the intuition doesn’t become *content* for the unschematizable concept; rather judgement borrows the *form* of the procedure followed in the case of the schematizable concept: “It is merely the rule of this procedure, not of the intuition itself, and thus merely the form of the reflection, not the content, which corresponds to the concept” (5:351).

One example Kant gives us of such symbolic representation is of a despotic state represented by a handmill. He then makes the puzzling statement that “between a despotic state and a handmill there is, of course, no similarity” (5:352). The statement is puzzling because surely the point of the analogy is that there *is* a similarity! Kant continues, “but there is one [a similarity] between the rule for reflecting on both and their causality” (5:352). His peculiar initial claim appears to be just that the despotic state is an abstract institution and the handmill a physical object. His further point seems to be that *our way* of representing the handmill is analogous to *our way* of representing the despotic state. As Henry Allison puts it, “[t]he key to this account of symbolization is the idea of a formally analogous reflection, which in the examples cited seems to concern the manner in which the relationship between the whole and its parts is conceived”
We think about the parts of the despotic state in a way analogous to the way we think about the parts of the handmill, its mechanics. We might describe this by saying something like, “in both cases the parts interact lifelessly, mechanically, under the agency of another being.” In emphasizing form to the exclusion of content, Kant appears to be pointing to a single way of understanding both the despotic state and the handmill, one that pertains to both apart from differences in concept that make of them different objects of understanding. What remains somewhat unclear is the relation between the content provided by the intuition of the handmill and the concept of the state: how exactly is the intuitional content of the handmill related to the concept of the state through this formal similarity? Kant is not clear on this point, and although he insists on the merely formal character of the analogy, it is relevant: it is because the handmill provides an intuition that the moral concept lacks that the analogy is helpful to us, so there is presumably some meaningful relation between the content provided by the intuition and the concept of the state. All Kant tells us, however, is that understanding of the despotic state somehow proceeds in a way similar to understanding of the handmill, based on a formal analogy between the two procedures. We don’t know exactly how the intuition belonging to the handmill participates in the understanding of the state, and this is a flaw in his account.

What we do know is that Kant claims that there is a formal analogy between reflection on the moral concept of the good and reflection on beauty. In Allison’s words, “to claim that beauty symbolizes morality is to claim that there is a sufficiently significant isomorphism between reflection on the beautiful and moral reflection so that the former activity may be regarded as a sensuously directed analogue of the latter” (255). Kant then outlines four respects in which reflection on beauty is similar to reflection on the good: both please immediately (1) and without any interest (2). In the judgement of beauty the imagination is freely in accord with the understanding, much as in the moral judgement the will is freely in accord with reason (3). And finally, in both cases, the principle for the judgement is declared to be universal (4).

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46 This statement is admittedly puzzling given that Kant has earlier distinguished judgement about the good from judgement about the beautiful by characterizing the judgment of the good as “combined with interest,” in explicit contrast with the judgement of the beautiful (section 4 of the “Analytic of the Beautiful”).
Determining the validity of Kant’s argument for beauty as a symbol of morality is difficult to do without an adequate account of how the intuition associated with the judgment of beauty participates in reflection on the moral concept. But even if we had such an account, assessment would also depend on assessment of both his aesthetic theory and his theory of morality, a task that exceeds the bounds of the current project. There are obvious questions to be asked about whether the disinterested attitude Kant associates with judgements of beauty is even possible, and whether the ahistorical, acultural character of this account is a significant weakness. Aspects of Kantian ethics are also subject to critique from utilitarian and morally particularist perspectives.

Regardless, Kant’s account of the relation between beauty and morality is remarkable for the power it accords to analogy when it comes to theoretical cognition of moral concepts. The analogy he describes is not merely ornamental or a mere heuristic, dispensable once one achieves a more rational form of understanding. It is no ladder to be kicked away but is an intrinsic part of the demonstration of the reality of the moral idea. Without the analogy the demonstration is not possible, and the moral idea is in no way theoretically cognizable. The Kantian view takes analogy as a valid, if indirect, way of understanding. In what follows, I will be working with his implicit claim that analogy may be neither ornament nor heuristic, but a fundamental mode of understanding.

Also useful in Kant’s account is his claim that abstract ideas need to be grounded—shown to have reality, made theoretically cognizable—through an intuition, and that the abstract ideas that are the basis of moral life can be shown to have reality through the beautiful if we have reason to see the beautiful as analogue of morality. We may dispute Kant’s reasons for making this claim, for we may dispute fundamental aspects of his accounts of both aesthetic and moral engagement, but he has nevertheless proposed the possibility of grasping the reality of an abstract moral idea through analogy with something with an intuitive aspect if the analogues are significantly similar. This possibility is assumed by Elaine Scarry in her account of beauty and justice, to which we will now turn. Scarry, however, goes further than Kant in the power she accords to her analogy. She argues that through analogy, the perception of beauty does not just help us to cognize the idea of justice but allows for the idea of justice to emerge in the first place. The idea is not arrived at independently but is birthed by beauty.
3  Scarry: Beauty as Analogue of Justice

Part of Scarry’s essay “On Beauty and Being Fair” is an account of an analogy between beauty and justice. Although I call the relation she describes ‘an analogy,’ she herself rejects the term, at least initially, a point I will discuss in what follows. Insofar as she does speak in terms of analogy, she claims a need for a perceptible analogue to the abstract ethical concept of justice, and her account is in this way like Kant’s, though it is far less technical and less fully developed than his. But her essay also presents novel angles on the relation between beauty and ethics and will thus enlarge our discussion. We will be particularly concerned with Scarry’s distinctive claim that one term of an analogy calls to its counterpart if it is missing. On this view beauty doesn’t just demonstrate the reality of the moral concept à la Kant but actually helps to bring it into being. Her account has generated criticism, however, particularly from Dennis Dutton, who has made several charges that I will address as I go. Scarry can be defended from some of his charges, but one reveals a significant limitation on her argument for the power of beauty to elicit justice, as we shall see.

Scarry, like several other contemporary theorists of beauty, does not define beauty. But she does claim that the attribute of beauty “most steadily singled out over the centuries” has been symmetry (96). Scarry refers to 1990s-era scientific studies in three different areas that show both animals and humans to be attracted to symmetrical features (96 n11). Dutton objects to this take on beauty; he argues that symmetry is not a necessary feature of beauty. That is true, but one is hard-pressed to describe any feature of beauty as necessary given the widely varying accounts, many of which point in opposite directions: consider Plato’s madness-inducing beauty

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47 In this chapter all citations will refer to “On Beauty and Being Fair” unless otherwise indicated.

48 Scarry uses ‘fairness’ and ‘justice’ interchangeably; wherever possible I will use ‘justice’ for the sake of continuity and consistency. Some may consider justice to be to some degree separate from ethics, but Scarry is conceiving of justice as a structure of relations with an ethical character. She identifies justice as an “ethical requirement” (91). This seems a reasonable claim if we take this structure of relations to be grounded in concern for the wellbeing of the individuals that instantiate it.

49 In “After the Great Tsunami” Dave Hickey tells us that his subject is beauty—“not what it is but what it does”—and generally avoids defining the concept in any hard and fast way (The Invisible Dragon 53). James Hillman, in “The Practice of Beauty,” asks us to hold in abeyance the question of what beauty is, invites us instead to let what he says “resonate with the recollections of beauty and feelings of beauty that have established themselves in [our] way[s] of life” (263).
in contrast with Kant’s disinterested judgement of beauty, or Schopenhauer’s linking of beauty with eternal forms and the timeless self\(^{50}\) in contrast with the traditional Japanese emphasis on beauty as ephemeral. Under such circumstances it’s not obvious that any qualities may be considered necessary to beauty. Scarry, for her part, doesn’t claim that symmetry is necessary to beauty, only that it’s a been common ascription throughout ages including ours. That point is hardly disputable.

More suspect is Scarry’s later claim that “the equality of beauty…resides not just in its interior feature of symmetry but in its generously being present, widely present, to almost all people at almost all times—as in the mates that they choose to love, their children, the birds that fly through their garden, the songs they sing” (108-9). The notion that beauty is equally present to all of us is somewhat shortsighted. Not everyone has equal access to beautiful homes or beautiful clothes, for although ingenuity and care can allow those without much money to create beautiful homes and clothes even without costly materials, in many societies working to stay above the poverty line may not afford them the time. The beauties of nature are supposedly free, but consider that in many countries a view or a beachfront can be bought. Getting to beautiful landscapes, furthermore, often requires a car, which is a luxury many inner city dwellers can’t afford. Is there beauty to be found in a depressed inner city neighbourhood? Perhaps; I haven’t enough experience to tell. But I did grow up in the suburbs, and I felt deprived of beauty there. I now live in a beautiful area of Montreal and am quite conscious of the privilege. Despite the presence of beautiful mates, children and possibly birds in the lives of the underprivileged, beauty is far from democratically or catholically distributed, at least in Western capitalist society. Many beauties are withheld from those without the requisite financial resources. Given this state of affairs, I will address beauty’s “equality” in terms of its “inner” quality of symmetry and will set aside Scarry’s further claim that beauty’s presence is equally distributed.

Scarry also attributes to beauty a second characteristic: that of being “present to the senses” (101). So its symmetry is perceptible. Scarry doesn’t say outright that perceptibility is necessary to beauty, but her categorical statement that beauty is present to the senses implies such

\(^{50}\) For another example, see Gabriel Richardson Lear’s argument for the importance of beauty’s timelessness in Plato’s *Symposium* (“Permanent Beauty and Becoming Happy in Plato’s Symposium”).
necessity. If she didn’t intend this implication, she should have clarified, especially because the claim that beauty is necessarily present to the senses is problematic: it’s common to speak of the beauty of a person’s character or to call the abstractions of math or physics beautiful. Physicist Cliff Cheung, for instance, says, “When someone writes down a formula or a theory, any physicist worth his salt can judge: is this beautiful or is this ugly? Equations that describe the universe can have a certain kind of elegance or they may not. In this sense, the ideas that we discuss have an intrinsic beauty.” And mathematician Kevin Costello remarks about his early interest in math, “I suppose the beauty of abstract mathematics really caught me” (Semeniuk). But perceptibility nevertheless has a long history of association with beauty, going all the way back to Plato, who described beauty as distinctive among the forms for being “the most clearly visible and the most loved” (Phaedrus 250D-E). It also extends all the way forward to today’s beauticians, who make their living dealing in the beauty of appearances. It’s not uncommon to characterize beauty as perceptible; it just isn’t universal.

In Scarry’s case, conceiving of beauty as perceptible is part of what determines the relation between beauty and justice to be one of analogy—rather than a relation of identity, for instance, or one of genus and species. Without this specification Scarry might simply call justice beautiful or see it as a species of beauty rather than an analogue. For the account of justice with which Scarry works also emphasizes symmetry: she follows John Rawls’ description of justice as “the symmetry of everyone’s relation to one another” (qtd. by Scarry 95). Scarry distinguishes beauty and justice, however, in terms of perceptibility:

> the symmetry, equality and self-sameness of the sky are present to the senses, whereas the symmetry, equality and self-sameness of the just social arrangements are not...Even once [justice] has been instantiated, it is seldom available to sensory apprehension, because it is dispersed over too large a field (an entire town or country), and because it consists of innumerable actions, almost none of which are occurring simultaneously.

(101)

We can’t call justice beautiful in part because, unlike beauty, it isn’t perceived. It’s worth noting that Scarry’s unperceived justice is different from Kant’s intuitionless moral idea, despite the shared emphasis on these respective concepts’ lack of a direct sensory or imagistic correlate. For according to Kant, although we can generate a moral idea, it’s impossible for us to find an
adequate intuition for it, while Scarry’s justice could in principle be perceived by us if we could witness the innumerable relations and actions that make up justice, for justice is, according to her, nothing other than the totality of those relations and actions.

On Scarry’s account of the analogy between beauty and justice, the common term of the analogy is symmetry. The analogy depends on the similarity of a perceived symmetry (beauty) to an abstract symmetry (justice). If we grant Scarry the definition of justice as a kind symmetry—a claim we’ll eventually submit to questioning—we can nevertheless ask what value the analogy has. What does it accomplish? Scarry present three answers.

3.1 First Answer

One answer depends on the claim that “[t]he equality of beauty enters the world before justice and stays longer because it does not depend on human beings to bring it about” (108). Even when humans are involved in the creation of beauty, says Scarry, “they are only collaborators in a much larger project” (108). She claims that justice, by contrast, is a human creation. Which means that beauty existed prior to justice: “in the young worlds and in the lapsed worlds, justice was not available to the senses for the simple reason that justice was not in the world” (101). Beauty, however, was already present, so it could provide a model for not-yet-birthed justice.

I will submit this claim to questioning in a moment, but will first continue to elucidate Scarry’s argument, for she goes even further in her account of the effectiveness of the analogy. The model provided by beauty is not inert: “In the absence of its counterpart, one term of an analogy actively calls out for its missing fellow; [beauty] presses on us to bring its counterpart into existence, acts as a lever in the direction of justice” (100). The present term “becomes pressing, active, insistent, calls out for, direct[s] our attention toward, what is absent” (109). Beauty doesn’t just wait around for justice to appear; it directs us toward it, calls for it, and hence helps us to bring it into being.

At this point it’s worth noting that Scarry oscillates strangely between an argument for the power of analogy and a denial that the relation between beauty and justice is one of analogy at all. She quotes Stuart Hampshire as saying, in a private conversation, that beauty and justice are unrelated “except, of course, analogically, by what they are: balance and the weighing of both sides” (94). She then rejects Hampshire’s description of the relation as one of analogy,
contrasting his formulation of the relation as analogy with “the much stronger formulation, that it is the very symmetry of beauty which leads us to, or somehow assists us in discovering, the symmetry that eventually comes into place in the realm of justice” (97). She repeats this contrast between the analogy formulation and the “much stronger formulation” a few pages later (99-100). The repeated rejection of analogy is a misstep, however. The contrast she should be drawing is one between passive and active analogy, for her argument is that “when both terms of an analogy are present, the analogy is inert…But when one term ceases to be visible…then the analogy ceases to be inert”—because the visible term calls for its missing fellow (109). What she is denying is not that the relation between beauty and justice is one of analogy but rather that it is “mere” analogy; what she is arguing for is the view that, far from being “mere,” an analogy can have significant generative power. Her rejection of the term ‘analogy’ is unfortunate because one of her striking contributions in this essay is an expansion of our understanding of the possible power of analogy.

Following Scarry’s claim that the analogy between beauty and justice can help young or lapsed societies to generate justice, we might observe that it’s hard to imagine the analogy having any purchase if we had absolutely no concept of justice. For the active power of the analogy depends on our sensitivity to the absence of the corresponding term, and if we had no grasp of the concept at all, we could hardly be sensitive to its absence. It’s more plausible to imagine an inchoate or burgeoning notion of justice being called into clearer focus by and developed through its beautiful analogue.

Even so, the notion of a call from one term to the other may seem far-fetched, irrational. Dutton certainly thinks so:

Scarry’s thought processes seem distinctly medieval, where any resemblance or metonym she fancies turns in her mind into a substantive, if not causal, relation. For the medieval scientists, just as there are seven days in the week and seven orifices in the head, so there must be seven planets. For Scarry, as beautiful things exhibit just proportion of their parts, and the petals of a flower are like little signals (traffic signals, in fact), so the just society is proportioned justly with regard to its parts, which are human beings to whom justice is distributed symmetrically (and therefore traffic behaves itself).
In this passage Dutton objects to what seems to him to be Scarry’s creation of an ad hoc relation between beauty and justice, one based on mere coincidence. We might note, however, that for all his apparent scorn for the use of analogy, he is himself drawing an analogy between Scarry’s thought process and that of the medieval scientist in order to discredit her thinking. But his is a faulty analogy.

It is mere coincidence that there are seven days in the week and seven orifices in the head, but medieval scientists concluded that the number seven was not merely a shared description of both the days of the week and the orifices in the head. Based on the analogy they assumed that the number seven had explanatory power when it came to the structure of nature in general, and that because it was found to pertain to the structure of both the calendar and the human body, it also pertained to the structure of the heavens. They assumed that the number seven was a common structuring principle of nature, but they had little basis for this assumption, especially given the preponderance of differently numbered groupings in nature: pairs of eyes or wings, three-leafed ivies or clovers, four-petalled mustard flowers, etc.

The mistake of attributing explanatory power to what is only justifiable as a shared description of two phenomena does not mean that the scientists were wrong to see an analogy between the seven days and the seven orifices. They were only wrong in assuming that the analogy explained something about the way in which both days and orifices came to be seven in number, wrong in assuming that they had discovered one of nature’s fundamental structuring principles. Scarry is making no such corresponding mistake. She is not claiming that because beauty and justice are both symmetrical, symmetry is the key to the structure of the universe. She is not even making the smaller scale claim that there is a reason both are symmetrical, some explanatory principle that pertains to both beauty and justice. She is just observing that they are both symmetrical, as we might reasonably observe that both the days of the week and the orifices in the head are seven in number. Nothing contentious here. She then argues that because they are both symmetrical, the symmetry of one can stand as a model for the symmetry of the other—hardly a contentious claim either, for there is reason internal to Rawlsian justice to think it symmetrical, apart from its relation to beauty. This reason comes from a society’s desire to treat everyone in some sense equally, which for a Rawlsian implies a symmetry of relations. In this regard, Scarry’s justice is quite different from the medieval scientists’ planets, for there was no reason internal to the arrangement of the heavens for the planets to be seven in number.
Scarry’s strongest claim with regard to the analogical relation of beauty and justice is that the model (beauty) can help us to bring the principle itself (justice) into existence, that the model can call for its counterpart. This too may seem an outlandish claim, but it squares with my experience as a practicing poet. What Scarry describes as one term “calling for” the other is a good account of my experience of “creating” an analogy—one such as “the sun slaps itself / on the wall like a fresh coat of paint” (“Love Poem IV”). I put “creating” in quotes because the process feels less like the creation of an analogy and more like the discovery of an analogy, one that the analogue I am focussed on helps me to discern. It is by focussing on one context (the sun on the wall) that the other context (paint on a wall) comes to the fore; that’s the procedure. Through attention to one analogue, the other emerges.

It is my contention that if the notion of a call from one term of an analogy to the other seems far-fetched, that may be the result of unnecessarily narrow ways of understanding the world. Western societies such as mine have, since the birth of modern science, tended to see the world as a passive, manipulable matter—what Heidegger called “standing reserve” (“Question Concerning Technology”). The thought that aspects of the world can actively engage us, influence us, direct us, is foreign to this way of understanding. Even if we put aside the question of the active or passive character of the world, there remains a cultural suspicion of modes of thought that stand outside the form of reason that came into ascendancy during the Enlightenment. As Horkheimer and Adorno describe it, this is a reason that insists on recourse to a “standard of calculability and utility,” and anything that does not conform to the standard “must be viewed with suspicion” (3). Calculative reason, they say, took on the unquestioned character of the god-invested world and religious doctrine it replaced (21). It forged for itself a kind of autocracy, assumed the role of unique authority, disregarding the validity of other ways of knowing and of engaging with the world—ways, we might observe, that include analogy. Jan Zwicky, for her part, points out philosophy’s tendency to privilege “systematicity”—thought that “assumes intelligibility is correctly and exhaustively characterized as a commitment to analytic structure and/or specifiable criteria of justification as the test(s) of clarity, and/or meaningfulness, and/or truth” (“Oracularity” 490n). Systematicity has tended to take precedence
over the resonance-centred kinds of thought that she defends, including analogy.\textsuperscript{51} Given this state of affairs, it may not be surprising that Dutton objects so strongly to Scarry’s reliance on analogy.

It may yet be true, however, that under such cultural circumstances it is unlikely that beauty can direct us toward its analogue. We must be analogy-sensitive, alive to the possibility of analogues, in order to be so directed. Such sensitivity is less likely to be developed or heeded in a society that is overly focussed on linear, logic-based modes of understanding. Under such cultural circumstances, it is likely that we will fail to be attuned to the power of analogies such as the connection between beauty and justice, won’t sense the call from one term to the other. But this is not an argument against the possibility of beauty directing us toward justice; it is an argument for developing analogical sensitivity.

A more convincing objection to the picture Scarry presents of a beautiful world that calls for the invention of justice is the objection to her historico-evolutionary claim that beauty preceded justice in the world. Was beauty really in the world before justice? And is justice qua symmetrical relations of all with all others really absent from nature, a purely cultural phenomenon? Symbiotic natural relations—the symbiosis we have with many varieties of microbe living in our guts, for instance—are examples of symmetrical relation in the sense that both parties benefit from the relation in a way that is more or less equal: the microbe fosters my life, and I foster its life. If justice is a symmetrical relation of each to other, it looks like my relation with the microbe might count as a natural form of justice.

But even if it is conceded that justice is a purely cultural invention, it’s not clear at what point sensitivity to beauty and notions of justice evolved respectively. Scarry doesn’t quote any research on the matter. Even if she is right that beauty, as a naturally occurring phenomenon, existed before the cultural creation of justice, our sensitivity to beauty could yet have evolved over time. Sensitivity to beauty may have developed in tandem with conceptions of justice, or even afterward. It’s possible that beauty aided early societies in developing just structures of relations, but it’s by no means a foregone conclusion. More convincing when it comes to an

\textsuperscript{51} For a discussion of analogy as form of thought that stands as an alternative to systematicity, see Zwicky’s \textit{Wisdom & Metaphor}. 
account of the value of the analogy between beauty and justice is Scarry’s further point: that “even when beauty and justice are both in the world, beauty performs a special service because it is perceptible” (109). It is to this line of thought we will now turn.

3.2 Second Answer

The second approach to the relation between beauty and justice discernable in Scarry’s discussion is somewhat similar to Kant’s claim that an intuition is required to demonstrate the reality of the moral idea and to cognize it theoretically. As we have seen, Scarry observes that when just social arrangements pertain to a society taken as a whole, they are non-perceptible, at least from the spatially and temporally limited point of view of a human being. Though she doesn’t say so explicitly, her argument for the significance of beauty in this context seems to be that having a sensory experience of an analogue of justice helps to remind us of the need for and value of those symmetrical relations as they appear in a society. As she says earlier, perceptible symmetrical beauty “holds steadily visible the manifest good of equality and balance” (97). This claim is perhaps the most obvious connection to be made between Scarry’s version of beauty and her Rawlsian justice.

Why would we need such a reminder if the structure of justice is already in place? Because no society is perfect, and justice is brought into being continually through its enactment on smaller and larger scales. We can turn our backs on justice; there is such thing as a “lapsed world,” as Scarry says (101). Reminders help us to maintain the structure of justice once it has been established, help us to allow it to continue to structure our relations as our lives and the lives of our societies unfold, presenting new challenges and new issues. But some may wonder whether we need a perceptible reminder of justice, may think that something like Kantian reason or at least an argument pointing to the importance of justice is or should be sufficient to keep it at the forefront of our attention. They may even worry that immersion in the perceptible is a distraction from the exercise of reason.

Yet even Kant, who places such emphasis on reason as the source of moral concepts, acknowledges the importance of some kind of intuition when it comes to demonstrating the reality of those concepts. Kant aside, we may at times be capable of remaining focussed on justice without the perceptible analogue—a few of us may even be able to do this all the time—but we are sensory creatures, and for better or for worse, the perceptible aspects of the world
have a hold on us, are a powerful part of our existence. If perceptible beauty brings its power to bear on us such that it supports a focus on the structure of just relations, so much the better. Such support is of value even if it isn’t always strictly necessary.

3.3 Third Answer

Scarry, however, makes a further case for the importance of the analogy of justice with perceived beauty. She claims that materiality is intrinsic to our concern for justice: “[i]t is the very exigencies of materiality, the susceptibility of the world to injury, that require justice” (102). Justice, she says, “comes into being because of the fragility of the material world” (108).

Beauty, then, is important as an analogue of justice not just because it exhibits a similar structure of relations to that of justice, but also because those relations emerge within the materiality that she takes to be the ground for justice. Beauty hence stands a reminder of this ground in a way that justice itself cannot, for justice, she has argued, is not perceptible. Justice is rooted in materiality and exists as a whole composed of relations among material beings in a material place, but it is not perceptible as that whole.

Scarry’s view here requires qualification and elaboration. It may be that despite her insistence on the etymological unity of “unjust” and “injustice,” it isn’t only the negative possibility of injury but also the positive possibility of flourishing that requires justice (107). We may, furthermore, be harmed in ways that are not materially evident—I can libel someone; I can deprive someone of education. Nevertheless, a significant reason for the need for justice does stem from materiality: from susceptibility to material injury and, if we expand on Scarry’s understanding, from a concern for material flourishing. It is also true that if justice is understood to be a whole made up of the symmetry of a totality of relations within a relatively large society or environment, it is outside the compass of our sensory powers. Because justice understood thusly is not itself perceptible, it can be powerful to be reminded in a material way of the structure of justice—because this is also to be reminded of part of the ground for that justice. The concept and at least one element of its justification are presented to us at one and the same time. Beauty is in this sense not just a mirror image of justice’s symmetry but also a visual argument for that justice.

But this is too simple as it stands. According to Scarry, the ground for justice isn’t materiality tout court—as we have seen, it’s the “fragility” of the material, the “susceptibility of the world to
injury.” If beauty is going to remind us of the ground for justice, it must reveal that fragility, that susceptible to injury. So if beauty is going to do the work of calling for justice while also showing the ground for justice, it must not only be symmetrical and perceptible, but also perceptibly fragile, susceptible to injury. Some beauties fit this bill—a cherry blossom, a face, a Fabergé egg. But not every symmetrical beauty will qualify. An emerald, for example, is beautiful and symmetrical but hardly susceptible to injury. A beautiful, symmetrical Rodin bronze such as “Eternal Spring” undergoes oxidization, but it presents itself as pretty sturdy on the whole. A Georgian home is also difficult to think of as fragile.

This limitation on the class of the beautiful doesn’t curtail Scarry’s argument for the significance of beauty’s perceptible, material character when it comes to putting us in touch with the ground for justice, but it does reveal the increasing narrowness of her account of beauty, an account that is already quite narrow, excluding as it does non-symmetrical beauties (a Queen Anne home, a traditional English garden, even a well-proportioned but asymmetrical painting such as Georgia O’Keeffe’s “Pelvis”) and non-perceptible beauties (the math proof, an idea, a person’s character or soul). As we now exclude non-fragile beauties, we may begin to wonder if Scarry’s account has become too narrow to stand as a general account of beauty, as she presents it. I will come back to this issue as we continue.

We may also have another question about beauty’s supposed revelation of injury-prevention as a ground for justice. What does beauty have to do with injury? Scarry herself says in an interview, “for me, the opposite of beauty is injury” (“On Evil, Pain and Beauty” 86). How does beauty reveal the susceptibility of the material world to injury if it is the opposite of injury? Scarry’s answer: “Beauty makes us want to diminish injury in the world. When I say that beauty makes us feel adverse to injury, what I’m trying to say is that one never wants to cease being opposed to injury” (“On Evil, Pain and Beauty” 86). Scarry’s claim is that beauty is not the passive opposite of injury but an active opposite; it is opposite in the sense that it actively opposes injury. In the interview she argues that beauty does so by moving us 1) toward creation rather than destruction and 2) toward an attitude of care—presumably by putting us in touch with the fragility and preciousness of material beings, as she argues in On Beauty and Being Just (“On Evil, Pain and Beauty” 86-7).
I have argued in chapter two that this second movement (toward care) is not necessarily effected by beauty, and I would argue the same in the case of the first movement (toward creation rather than destruction)—readers may recall the example I provided of wanting to stomp on the delicate eyelid of ice that formed over a puddle. But both are possible effects of beauty, and such effects do emerge at least sometimes. Beauty may be said to reveal a ground for justice in such instances.

But I question Scarry’s straight-up assertion that for her, beauty is the opposite of injury. She neglects the fetishization of injury as beauty—the tubercular beauties of the 19th century, for example. David Morens tells us that “[t]he pallor and wasting, the burning sunken eyes, the perspiration-anointed skin—all hallmarks of the disease—came to represent haunted feminine beauty” (“At the Deathbed of Consumptive Art”). Or consider today’s female fashion models and movie stars, many of whom are undernourished if not actually anorectic but are widely considered to be beautiful. In both cases, beauty is not the opposite of injury but depends on injury.

One might argue that in the contemporary case, the beautiful but undernourished fashion model is not always perceived to be injured. But she often is, for it has become fairly common knowledge that many such bodies are the result of a form of injury. One might also want to argue that perceiving the movie star’s injury will diminish one’s sense that she is beautiful, but it needn’t. It is possible to know that she is unhealthy and still find her beautiful, a complex and difficult state in which many of us find ourselves.

To this association of beauty and injury, and to the problem it presents to the claim that beauty is the opposite of injury, Scarry might simply say that these beauties are not beauties on her account, that “burning sunken eyes” are not related to the perceptible symmetry and life-affirming qualities that she has in mind. These injury-dependent “beauties” are really something else. The problem here is the one identified above, a significant narrowing of her account of the beautiful. Beauty must now be symmetrical, perceptible, fragile and non-injury-dependent, and each qualifier eliminates many entities often considered to be beautiful. Instead, I propose a weakening of her claim. One might say that although beauty doesn’t always function as the opposite of injury in the way Scarry describes, it can and sometimes does. The two possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Scarry’s account functions well for some instances of beauty—it
works well as a description of my experience of the cherry blossoms near my home, for example. In such cases, beauty can be said to work against injury and to reveal a ground for justice. It just doesn’t work this way in all cases.

4 Synecdoche and Nested Wholes

If we now turn back to the notion of beauty’s perceptible symmetry as a significant analogue of justice, we may unearth another objection to Scarry’s claim about the analogy’s significance. For Scarry herself mentions instances of what look like synecdochal representations of justice. In light of this phenomenon, it may seem that the beauty of a poppy—Scarry’s example—is not particularly helpful when it comes to keeping justice in view once that justice has been conceived of and to some degree enacted, for the synecdochal representation is perceptible, and the tie to the sociopolitical is tighter in such a case and thus presumably more effective a link than the tie between the poppy and the sociopolitical. So what use the poppy?

Although Scarry conceives of justice as consisting of all the relations that make up a town or country over a given period of time and hence as imperceptible, she allows that in certain times and places just political relations are “condensed” and become perceptible (103). A great assembly hall in which democratic deliberation takes places might be one such instance, she suggests, and follows this up with the example of the Greek tireme ships (103-4). “Out of the spectacle of the tireme ship,” she says, “Athenian democracy was born” (104). Scarry refers to historian Bruce Russet’s account of the link between the rise of democracy and the tireme ship: democratic reforms made the rowers into full citizens, and the balance of power was placed in the hands of the rowers (104). The rowers were citizens literally pulling together. The fact that these were warships shouldn’t deter us from associating them with justice, continues Scarry, for justice requires “a dividing up, an equal parsing out, of the unsightly means of force” (107).

One may wonder how compatible war and justice are, but even if we don’t take on that complex issue, we may observe that the rowers were poor men; the wealthy aristocrats of Athens were not to be seen with an oar in hand. Their absence from the tiremes reveals the ships to have been a somewhat inadequate embodiment of symmetrical sociopolitical relations. Furthermore, the

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52 Bearing in mind that no perfectly just society exists.
tireme does not appear to have birthed justice as Scarry claims but rather to have embodied it once it was established, at least according to the passage quoted from Russet. It was democratic reform that made the rowers full citizens and hence a synecdochic correlate of democratic society; it wasn’t their visibility as rowers that instigated democratic reforms.

Despite questions about the tireme, it remains conceivable that certain times and places can be condensations of fair political relations and can thus allow those relations to become perceptible. The political assembly is a plausible instance of such a condensation. In such a case it wouldn’t be wrong to say that the assembly is itself beautiful, according to Scarry’s criteria of symmetry and perceptibility. The relation between justice and the assembly, however, remains figurative, is an instance of synecdoche if Scarry truly takes just sociopolitical relations to include all symmetrical relations within a society as they exist and are acted out over time. For while I perceive the assembly hall, I am not perceiving the driver stopping at a stop sign outside, and Scarry herself offers this action as an example of a part of a society’s just relations (101-2). Perceiving justice, she says, requires perceiving “each car, each driver, each road surface with its white dividing line, each blinking light” (102). I am not perceiving these things when I perceive the assembly hall, hence the hall functions as synecdoche.

But the existence of a perceptible synecdoche raises questions about the significance of non-sociopolitical beauty as an analogy for justice—do we really need the analogy provided by Scarry’s fragile, symmetrical poppy when there exist instances of perceptible sociopolitical symmetry more closely connected to the justice of a whole society since it is already an instance of symmetrical societal relations?

There is also the question of scale. In referring to justice as pertaining to the relations in “an entire town or country,” Scarry herself introduces the possibility that there exist relational wholes within relational wholes. The whole that is the town exists within the whole that is the country. And some interior wholes may be characterized by relations that are both perceptible and just. On the radio recently I heard an elementary school teacher describe a classroom dynamic whereby some of her students were regularly excluded from play by the other children. Upset by this trend, she spoke with her students about instituting an “everybody gets to play” policy. They decided that any child who asked to join in would get to play—their relations to each other would in this sense be symmetrical. And the policy worked. If we now imagine that the teacher
is observing her classroom, the children busy at play together, it is reasonable to say that she is perceiving classroom justice—a justice embodied by the children as they are related to one another in their play. That she cannot perceive their relations on more than one day, hour or second simultaneously doesn’t diminish the holistic character of what she does perceive. It is a moment in which there exists a whole of symmetrical relations that exists within a larger temporal whole.

Of course this embodied justice might not be perceived by someone who wasn’t aware of the policy, but needing to know what to look for, needing familiarity with a context that enables embodied justice to become apparent, does not reduce the perceptibility of the relations any more than needing to know what a planet is in order to see it as a planet (as opposed to, say, a star) reduces the perceptibility of that planet as planet. The relations in the classroom would be apparent to anyone who, like the teacher, had the background knowledge to facilitate perception of the students as symmetrically related.

So the question arises again: if there are not only perceptible synecdochic instantiations of justice but also perceptible relational wholes-within-wholes that exhibit just relations, do we need the analogy provided by non-sociopolitical beauty? What does it offer when there exist instances of perceptible sociopolitical symmetry more closely connected to sociopolitical justice than a symmetrical poppy?

I propose that perceptible beauty that is not directly political offers further support, further reinforcement. We live amidst multiple situations, inhabit multiple roles, have various needs, desires and aims, all asking for our attention. “The contemplation...of beauty...can sustain us in our efforts to think continually about that human order which should be the subject uppermost in our minds,” says Simone Weil (“The Needs of the Soul,” Anthology, 114). The demand to think continually about the human order is excessive, and the order she has in mind is more a God-given order than Scarry’s culturally created justice, but Weil nevertheless points to the need to maintain an on-going relation to questions of human order and acknowledges the effort this requires. Keeping justice at the forefront of one’s attention can be difficult, and anything that supports us in this effort is of value.

Murdoch’s virtue-centred ethic lends credence to Weil’s claim that we need to be in on-going relation to the question of human order, and to the thought that beauty can help in this
endeavour. Murdoch is concerned with morality in general rather than with justice in particular, but we can apply much of what she says to the case of justice. Murdoch argues that morality centres less on choices made in isolated situations and more on a way of life underpinned by both consciously and unconsciously developed attitudes and tendencies. “It is what lies behind and in between actions and prompts them that is important” (65). Of course, action is important, she says, but we must also have “some more positive conception of the soul as a substantial and continually developing mechanism of attachments” (69). “Continually developing” suggests the need to conceive of justice as more than a principle brought to bear when a situation calls for an ethical response. In order for it to be brought to bear in such a moment, it must have been part of the development of the soul till that point. Coming to act justly looks to be a matter of continuous development in that direction, and something like regular attention to “the human order” seems to be called for.

Relatedly, Murdoch elsewhere proposes conceiving of morality as a matter of “a total vision of life” (39). This vision is composed of multiple incidents and attitudes, some directly moral in character, some less so:

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praise-worthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the texture of a man's being or the nature of his personal vision. (39)

Although Murdoch is concerned with morality in general and not justice in particular, based on her discussion we can argue that, as Weil indicates, justice is of value insofar as it is an on-going concern, part of the fabric of a life. Justice matters more as a way of being in the world that prepares us to act justly in situations that call for just action than it does as a principle brought to bear in certain kinds of circumstance and not in others. Taking our cue from Murdoch, we can argue that concern for justice is ideally something that runs through multiple dimensions of
people’s lives, that shows up even in “their mode of speech or silence,” “in what they think attractive or praiseworthy,” in “what they think funny.” If non-directly-sociopolitical beauty helps us to be aware of justice in less overtly sociopolitical contexts, so much the richer is our moral fabric. Justice is so much more deeply bound into our lives.

Non-directly-sociopolitical beauty, as part of what lies behind and between just actions, can play a role in preparing us to act justly when such action is called for, for experiences of the value of justice in multiple contexts can help a concern for justice to become second nature. The connection of non-directly-sociopolitical beauty to justice through analogy can be part of “the background of attachment” that underpins my just action when I am called upon by a situation. Experiences of these beauties may not be the most prominent thread in the fabric of a life, but such a fabric depends on many threads. Experiences of beauty can, through the analogy with justice, be part of a “total vision” that is characteristically just.

5 Symmetry and Injustice

Although if we accept Scarry’s accounts of both beauty and justice, there is reason to think the analogy can have some effect when it comes to promoting justice, serious objections to Scarry’s argument emerge when we question the political and ethical value of symmetry. Dennis Dutton raises two such questions. The first concerns Wagner:

I write this just having heard this afternoon the Texaco broadcast of the current Metropolitan production of *Die Walküre*. As a work of art, this opera’s profound sense of symmetry and its exploration of justice are sublime and breathtaking enough to bring tears to my eyes. Does anyone need to be reminded how this art was used, or by whom, in the last century?

Few need reminding that Hitler was a fan of Wagner and a regular attendee of the Bayreuth festival, nor that he held up Wagner’s operas as the gold standard for Nazi art. It is also common knowledge that Wagner himself was an anti-semitic. Dutton’s claim is that the example of *Die Walküre* shows that beauty’s symmetry can be used to promote an unjust regime. A weaker version of this claim, however, would be that beauty’s symmetry can co-exist with injustice, and I will address that version first.
I have already argued that there is no necessary connection between the symmetry of beauty and justice. Beauty’s capacity to call for justice depends on a sense of the absence of such justice, but we can only be sensitive to its absence if we already have some bare, growing notion of justice. If a “lapsed” society is determinedly turned away from the concept of justice, it’s unlikely that the analogy beauty offers will have a foothold. I have also noted that our capacity to tune into the call depends on sensitivity to analogy, which varies. On both counts, the analogical connection is not necessary or is not necessarily effective, but it may yet be effective in at least some cases. As an example of the coexistence of beauty’s symmetry and injustice, the role of Wagner in Nazi Germany isn’t sufficient to undo Scarry’s account, only to show that the analogy isn’t always effective, that sometimes beauty coexists with injustice and fails to call for justice, at least in a way that we can hear. If it didn’t fail, we might live in a very different world. Justice is often a struggle, but beauty is sometimes part of that struggle.

Dutton’s actual point, however, is the stronger claim beauty’s symmetry can be used to promote an unjust regime. But although Wagner’s music was bound into Hitler’s cultural agenda and the association between them is strong enough to persist to this day, it’s not clear that the operas’ symmetry in particular was a feature Hitler or any other Nazi took to be emblematic of the regime’s structure. The association may have been more diffuse than that. Dutton, furthermore, calls Die Walküre’s exploration of justice “sublime and breathtaking”—so following his logic it isn’t only the beauty of symmetry that can be used to further an unjust cause, but the exploration of justice itself? If that’s the case, then exploration of justice can be used to promote unjust arrangements just as much as beauty’s symmetry can. So if we are to follow Dutton in dismissing the value of beauty’s symmetry to justice, we must also dismiss the value of exploration of justice to justice. But I cannot imagine that any philosopher of ethics or law would be inclined to do so. For we know that such deliberation can contribute to justice; likewise, Scarry’s argument has been that beauty can contribute to justice by way of analogy.

More powerful is Dutton’s earlier objection, on which the above objection builds. The earlier observation is that “symmetry describes many well-ordered dictatorships” (par. 20). The claim here is not just that beauty’s symmetry can be used to promote unjust political systems, but that symmetry may actually be characteristic of those systems, built into them.
One might object that on Scarry’s account of political symmetry, such a regime does not qualify as symmetrical, for “the unsightly means of power” are not equally divided up and parsed out; they are rather concentrated in one pair of hands (107). But Scarry’s description of just relations may be beside the point here. If there exists some form of symmetry characteristic of dictatorships, even if it is not a “symmetry of everyone’s relations to each other,” beauty’s symmetry could as easily be an analogue calling for this form of symmetry as for the symmetry characteristic of the just society. Dutton points out that symmetry can be found in dictatorships. Though he does not specify how it may be that a dictatorship is symmetrical, we can observe that if citizens are equally under the thumb of a dictator, the society can be described as symmetrical in terms of each citizen’s relation to the seat of power. Each of the relations to the dictator at the centre of the society is a mirror of the next.

We might also consider the symmetry of revenge, the eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. Is this a form of justice we hope to benefit from the analogy with beauty? I propose that it isn’t. Reparation and compensation are desirable, and one could even argue for the value of a punishment that serves as deterrent, but these are different from revenge. Revenge seeks an injury to balance an injury, an injury on one side to square with an injury on the other. To seek the second injury, however, is to compound injury, to increase injury, which is not a desirable goal. It is to subscribe to the faulty logic of two-wrongs-make-a-right. The trilogy of plays that tell the violent story of the house of Atreus, translated by Anne Carson and published as The Oresteia, shows how destructive the cycle of revenge is, for the ever-compounding intra-family revenge killings threaten to utterly destroy the family.

What might Scarry say in her defense? She might look back to her argument that beauty not only provides an analogue for the formal arrangement of relations in a just society but also reminds us of the material ground for justice, i.e. the prevention of material injury. I have pointed out that this is not the only ground for justice, but it is nevertheless a ground. A dictatorship, however, is not necessarily incompatible with material well-being. We might for instance, consider Fidel Castro’s Cuba, which featured state-of-the-art medical care—there for citizens to enjoy so long as they didn’t criticize the regime. On the other hand, unjust imprisonment, death and torture are often tools of a dictatorship, and these are certainly instances of material injury. Is it possible that despite a shared symmetry between beauty and the shape of a society under a dictatorship, beauty’s fostering of attitudes of care for beings susceptible to
injury could dampen the call for its corresponding term when that term is a system that inflicts injury? Could beauty call for a dictatorship and cancel out that call at one and the same time? It could. But it is also quite easy to imagine someone who is sensitive to the analogy between beauty and the symmetry of the dictatorship yet feels no urge to care for the material well-being of the beautiful. Particularly if the beautiful is not the fragile beauty, susceptible to injury, that Scarry assumes beauty to be, for as we have seen above, a being can be both symmetrical and materially durable. Because beauty does not necessarily foster an attitude of care, it is possible that it could do harm by promoting the symmetry of a dictatorship.

We might have more success in defending Scarry from the charge that beauty qua symmetrical can promote dictatorship qua symmetrical if we pursue the notion that sensitivity to analogy includes sensitivity to disanalogy. Seeing what is common includes a capacity to see difference; the concept of the common is meaningless otherwise. This takes us back to the thought I initially dismissed: the claim that, following Scarry’s account of political symmetry, the dictatorship doesn’t qualify, for power is not equally shared but is concentrated in one pair of hands. There is a sense in which such an arrangement is profoundly asymmetrical, for one person stands in distinctly unequal relation to the others. If sensitivity to analogy can alert us to a similarity between beauty and symmetrical sociopolitical relations, sensitivity to disanalogy can alert us to a difference between beauty and asymmetrical relations, including the asymmetry of dictatorship. Beauty will thus seem to stand in opposition to such relations.

But this perception of disanalogy depends on being able to make a shift in one’s way of conceiving of the dictatorship. In order to see the dictatorship as symmetrical, we need to think of the society as centred on the dictator. In order to see it as asymmetrical, we need to think of society as a net of just relations without this privileged centre. Because, as we have seen, beauty’s symmetry is in one way compatible with the structure of a society centred on a dictator, beauty doesn’t necessarily encourage us to conceive of society as symmetrical in the other sense, as a network of just relations, and it is only from this point of view that the dictatorship’s disanalogy with beauty emerges. So it could go either way: beauty could either promote or oppose a dictatorship, depending on one’s conception of the social structure as either having a privileged centre or being without such a centre such that privilege is equally dispersed. Dutton’s point holds: beauty can promote dictatorship. It is not necessarily allied with justice.
Scarry is right that beauty’s perceptible symmetry can serve as a model that helps a society, but it can also be a model that harms. Symmetry is not necessarily allied with the good.

So is it all over for Scarry’s argument? Not necessarily. Beauty qua symmetrical can yet serve as a helpful model for a society in which everyone’s relations to everyone else are symmetrical. Beauty can help us to form this ideal and to keep it in sight, but we must keep a critical eye on the intrinsic merits of the sociopolitical structures that emerge from analogies with beauty. Scarry makes a mistake in failing to discuss the possibility of beauty serving as a model of injustice—a model for dictatorship or for a revenge-based justice. These possibilities must be kept in view if we are to heed beauty’s call for the symmetrical society Scarry has in mind. The alternatives alert us to the need for a critical eye when it comes to accepting beauty’s symmetry as a model. The possibility of being led astray entails that we must be alert to harmful forms of symmetrical relation for which beauty may serve as a model as much as it may for the just society. If such vigilance is maintained, we may with some confidence look to beauty as an analogue of a society that is just in the way Scarry describes.

6 Asymmetry and Justice

So far we have considered the possibility that unjust social arrangements may be in some sense symmetrical. Now we will look at a version of justice that may be asymmetrical and hence stands as a disanalogue of beauty as Scarry conceives of it. Scarry’s beauty has no purchase when it comes to encouraging us along the route toward this kind of justice. Symmetrical beauty might even be thought to point us away from asymmetrical justice if the analogue causes us to focus on symmetry in justice to the exclusion of its asymmetries.

In “Equity and Mercy,” Martha Nussbaum argues for a form of asymmetrical justice that includes equity and mercy. She defines equitable judgement as “judgement that attends to the particulars” and follows Seneca in his account of mercy as “the inclination of the mind toward leniency in exacting punishment” (85). She traces a movement in Ancient Greek philosophy from the Stoics’ uncompromisingly symmetrical, revenge-based conception of justice to Aristotle’s argument for an equitable justice (one that attends to particulars) and finally to Seneca’s conception of justice as including mercy. Says Nussbaum, “[t]he merciful attitude, as Seneca develops it, entails regarding each particular case as a complex narrative of human effort in a world full of obstacles” (103). Seneca’s bet, Nussbaum continues, is that after imaginatively
inhabiting the complexity of a given narrative, a judge will be inclined to mercy rather than retribution (103). Turning to the contemporary context, Nussbaum acknowledges the need for a justice that consists of codification and deterrence as well as of discretion and equity, but she maintains the importance of the asymmetries introduced by Aristotle and Seneca (109).

Equitable justice represents an asymmetry, in contrast with the symmetry of a revenge-based justice or even that of a rule of law that is not revenge-based but is inflexible. For the equitable judge does not necessarily apply the law in the same way to each situation; her application of the law may be asymmetrical, depending on the exigencies of a given situation. Mercy brings another asymmetry with it, for the merciful victim does not seek an eye for an eye; she will bear the loss of her own eye and perhaps seek compensation or reparation, but she won’t seek a similar loss of eye on the other side. One might be inclined to think of mercy as excessive, i.e. a response that exceeds what could be reasonably demanded of an individual, and asymmetrical in that sense as well. Seneca’s point, however, is that when one understands the complex narrative that lies behind a wrong-doing, mercy comes to view as exactly what is called for. Though mercy is perhaps not legislatible and in that sense exceeds the bounds of law, it is on the other hand entirely appropriate to the situation and is in this sense not excessive, for it meets the demands of the situation rather than exceeds them.

We might think of justice as a structure of symmetries that allows for the asymmetries of equity. Everyone, we could say, should be judged with an eye to the particularities of his situation. In this sense, we are all equally entitled to being considered asymmetrically, and our relations to one another are thus ultimately symmetrical. One could even argue that everyone deserves mercy, and that in this way too we stand in symmetrical relation to one another. But this is of little help when it comes to defending Scarry’s argument for symmetrical beauty’s role as a model for justice. Even if we point out senses in which symmetries co-exist with asymmetries in justice, justice is nevertheless a complex blend of both symmetrical and asymmetrical relations, and beauty qua symmetry is a poor model for such complexities. Beauty qua symmetry fails to draw adequate attention to the significant asymmetries Nussbaum discusses as integral to a sophisticated justice system. Such a beauty is thus an impoverished analogue of justice, for it illuminates only one aspect of justice, that of symmetrical relations.
Overall Evaluation of Scarry’s Account of Beauty as Analogue of Justice

There is reason to understand analogues as capable of calling for each other if we are sufficiently sensitive to analogical relations, and pointing to this possibility is a valuable contribution on Scarry’s part. But her account of beauty as calling for justice through analogy has considerable limitations. Scarry fails to pay adequate attention to beauty’s capacity to function as an analogue of the troubling symmetrical relations that may characterize a dictatorship, as Dutton points out, or a revenge-based form of justice. This oversight doesn’t mean that beauty can’t function as an analogue of the more desirable forms of society and of justice Scarry has in mind, but the fact that Scarry’s beauty can function as analogue of undesirable forms of society and of justice brings into relief the need to submit analogues of beauty to ethical criticism. Being an analogue of beauty qua symmetrical doesn’t guarantee ethical goodness. As an analogue, beauty can help us to unearth possible structures of ethical and political relations, good and bad, but those structures must be submitted to scrutiny independently.

A more serious limitation of Scarry’s argument for beauty’s power to evoke justice through analogy is that her account of beauty is restricted in scope, excluding as it does asymmetrical beauties (including those that may yet be considered well-proportioned), non-perceptible beauties, durable beauties and injury-dependent beauties. Though this last class is admittedly small, the class of asymmetrical beauties is significant. So not all forms of beauty can call for justice in the way Scarry describes; only some can. Even more serious is that her account of justice emphasizes symmetry without acknowledging the asymmetries that Nussbaum identifies as significant aspects of justice. Beauty qua symmetrical can call for justice in one aspect, but a full conception of justice must also incorporate asymmetries, which cannot be called for by beauty as Scarry describes it.

Scarry’s account of beauty’s call for justice remains illuminating if it is understood to have effect only within the limits I have outlined. Nevertheless, I now propose taking up a broader account of beauty, one that includes both symmetrical and asymmetrical relations. This account might seem to have more potential as an analogue of justice than does Scarry’s, but it in fact works best as an analogue of ethical relations. The relations I will characterize as beautiful, however, will include those Scarry identifies as ethical on account of their symmetry, so this version of the
analogy between beauty and ethical relations can be seen as a broadening of Scarry’s account such that beauty has wider application as an analogue in the realm of the ethical.

8 Beauty as Analogue of Ethical Relations

Beauty does have a strong connection with symmetry, as Scarry claims, but as I have mentioned, to focus exclusively on beauty as symmetry is to neglect the beauty of asymmetrical beings, what Gerard Manley Hopkins calls “pied beauty.” It is to overlook philosophies such as "the Japanese aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency" (Saito 377). Yukiro Saito tells us that this aesthetic approach was significantly influenced by retired Buddhist monk Yoshida Kenkō (c. 1283-c. 1350). She quotes the following passage from his Essays in Idleness:

It is only after the silk wrapper has frayed at top and bottom, and the mother-of-pearl has fallen from the roller that a scroll looks beautiful. I was impressed to hear the Abbot Kōyū say, "It is typical of the unintelligent man to insist on assembling complete sets of everything. Imperfect sets are better." In everything, no matter what it may be, uniformity and completeness are undesirable. (377-8)

Saito also tells the story of a tea master and his disciple. The master had bought a new vase, and the disciple smuggled a hammer into the tea ceremony so as to break one of the vase’s symmetrical handles and “make it even more appealing” (378). But the master had beaten him to it; the handle was already gone. If beauty sometimes lies in symmetries, this tradition reminds us that it may also lie in asymmetrical peculiarities.

It is partly because Scarry’s account does not include this approach to beauty that I propose looking back to last chapter’s discussion of Aristotle and his account of beauty (to kalon) as the fitting (to prepon). Here we find a description of beauty that is less narrow than Scarry’s. It includes beauty qua symmetry, for symmetry refers to a kind of fit, that between two halves, one balancing the other perfectly. But it also includes relations of traditionally harmonic if not symmetrical proportions—ones such as the classic nautilus shell, in which golden mean nests within golden mean. The account of beauty as the fitting also extends even further, to less regular asymmetrical relations that are yet fitting, like those represented by the asymmetrical vase.
Saito tells us that the Japanese tradition of imperfection and insufficiency sees the broken-handled vase as beautiful in part because Zen Buddhism encouraged the celebration of transience. Signs of age in the things of this world are fitting because everything here is transient, and the enlightened can appreciate beings in their transience, can see the marks of their passing as beautiful because these marks befit transient, perishable beings. Says Saito, “[i]nstead of lamenting the fact that the object no longer exhibits the original, perfectly shaped, lustrously colored appearance, the aesthetics of imperfection elevates this fall from the graceful perfection to an even higher aesthetic plane by celebrating vicissitude and perishability” (383). Even flaws that are not due to age, she says, can be found beautiful insofar as they represent submission to forces beyond our control. The firing process undergone by tea vessels is unpredictable, and the resulting wares are often uneven in colour and pattern. Seeing these as beautiful “encourages our acceptance of and submission to our condition in life” (383). To find the flawed tea cup beautiful is to see the flaw as fitting—fitting, that is, for a being that must submit to forces greater than itself. If one subscribes to this Buddhist tenet, the asymmetry introduced by the flaw is fitting and therefore beautiful.

Because the Aristotelian take on beauty can accommodate both symmetrical and asymmetrical beauties such as the broken-handled vase, it has more potential as an analogue of justice than Scarry’s symmetrical beauty, for the complex conception of justice presented by Nussbaum combines symmetries and asymmetries, and an exclusive focus on symmetry makes of beauty a limited analogue of such justice. But it is only the abstract concept of beauty-qua-fitting that appears roomy enough to accommodate diverse aspects of justice, both symmetrical and asymmetrical. In fact, many instantiations of fitting relations are no more adequate reflections of the complex mixture of symmetries and asymmetries of justice than are Scarry’s beautiful symmetries—which symmetries, after all, are included in the notion of fitting relation. The nautilus shell with its structure of nested means does not obviously lend itself to analogy with justice; neither does the frayed and disintegrating scroll, for it doesn’t reveal symmetries as well as asymmetries. The broken vase may be a more helpful analogue of these complexities.

Saito observes that this philosophical/religious rationale for the aesthetics of insufficiency and imperfection originally co-existed with a sociopolitical agenda: to safeguard the privileged from the wrath of the underprivileged by foregoing ostentatious display of wealth and to justify the on-going poverty and insufficiency of the underprivileged by aestheticizing that insufficiency (380-1).
certainly more helpful than the wholly symmetrical vase to which Scarry hearkens, for the broken vase incorporates both symmetry and asymmetry. But even then it is an analogue in only the broadest, most general sense: as an entity that includes symmetry and asymmetry. The complexities of the relations between symmetry and asymmetry in the justice described by Nussbaum don’t map easily onto the vase, for this justice is symmetrical in more than one sense: in terms of everyone’s answerability to a given law and in terms of everyone’s entitlement to consideration of the particularities of his situation. It is this second form of symmetry that gives rise to possible asymmetries in the application of the law. The vase however, is only symmetrical in one sense, and the asymmetry of the broken handle in no way arises from that symmetry.

If we are looking for a generative analogue of a suitably complex justice, the bare notion of “perceived fitting relation” is unlikely to suffice. I propose, however, that beauty qua fitting relation functions well as an analogue of the fitting ethical relations that are the focus of a particularistic ethic such as we find in Aristotle, an ethical approach that doesn’t (or doesn’t only, depending on the philosophy) appeal to rules of conduct but seeks to tune into the perhaps unique aspects of a given set of circumstances and to respond accordingly. In this sense beauty is a useful analogue for the aspect of justice that seeks acquaintance with relevant particularities of a given situation, if not for justice as a whole. As an analogue of fitting ethical relations, beauty can also be an analogue for the aspect of justice on which Scarry focusses—that of the symmetry of everyone’s relations to everyone else’s—for such relations may be seen as fitting. But both these analogies are incomplete. The beauty of fitting relations is thus most effective as a relatively complete analogy for relations that are ethical insofar as they are fitting.

As I argued above, asymmetrical relations may emerge when one considers a person or situation in his or its particularity because one hearkens to a principle of ethical symmetry that sees everyone as deserving of being considered in their particularity by everyone else. But thinking of beauty as a matter of fitting relations means that beauty may simply function as an analogue of asymmetrical ethical relations that are nevertheless fitting. I have in mind asymmetrical relations such as a relation of forgiveness: my friend Lynn forgives me for forgetting our lunch date and thus creates a relation between us that is asymmetrical, at least in the sense that Lynn has been treated with a lack of consideration while I have been treated with consideration. The asymmetry created by forgiveness, however, may be appropriate in this situation for any number
of reasons: she understands that I’m under a lot of stress, or we have a bond that makes this oversight of small consequence. We might also consider the relations embodied when a parent temporarily gives more attention to a sick and suffering child than to his healthy and happy sibling. The parent’s care is asymmetrically distributed, but the asymmetry is appropriate to the needs of his respective children. The parent, furthermore, needn’t have appealed to a principle of symmetrical consideration of each child’s particularities in order to choose to act asymmetrically in this instance. He may simply have responded to the diverse needs of his children, fitting himself to those needs in the most appropriate way he could. The asymmetrical beauty of the broken vase, insofar this beauty is grounded in appropriateness, stands as an analogy of both my friend’s appropriately asymmetrical forgiveness and the parent’s appropriately asymmetrically distributed care.

In the last chapter, however, I did not present the beautiful qua the fitting as an analogue of ethical relations. Rather, the claim was that virtue and virtuous action just are beautiful. In order to consider beauty as an analogue of ethical relations, we must consider relations that are fitting but are not directly ethical: the aptness of the vase’s broken handle, the beautiful fit of the pieces of wood in my handmade table, the fantastic coordination of the human body, the complementary colours of the blue snow and orange flames in Mary Pratt’s “Broken Flood” (as well as the way in which the wind-blown flames and the river current blend, both leading the eye to the right…a group of fitting relations can be a complex matrix requiring lengthy description.)

My proposed analogy of beauty and ethical relations is similar to Scarry’s, though my accounts of both beauty and of ethical relations include relations both symmetrical and asymmetrical. So it is perhaps not surprising that the same question arises here as it did when we considered Scarry’s analogy: what significance has the analogy? And one apparent difference between Scarry’s analogy and mine might seem to make this harder to answer in my case. Scarry’s justice—the ethical side of her analogy—is abstract, or effectively abstract, whereas the ethical side of my analogy is less obviously abstract, for a particularistic ethic emphasizes sensitivity to concrete situations. A particularistic ethic need not proceed from an abstract ethical principle or rule. It can begin and end in sensitivity to concrete particulars. Given such an approach, there may not be an abstract idea in need of the support of the concrete, perceptible relations discoverable in beauty in the way that Scarry describes. The analogy I have proposed might therefore seem less than significant.
Even if the moral particularism I have described doesn’t necessarily proceed on the basis of an abstract rule or idea and therefore might not be thought to need concretization through analogy with perceptible beauty, it is still possible that analogies within the realm of the concrete can support our insights into the character of each analogue, that the analogues can illuminate one another. Given analogical sensitivity, I may, when my sister visits me, see us fitting into and around each other’s ways of being as gracefully as the petals of my neighbour’s climbing roses arc around each other, complementarily. The roses may help me to see how to relate to my sister by embodying a style of relation I want to emulate. If I am having trouble living with my sister during the visit, I might even pick a rose and keep it around to remind me of the way I want to be with her.

An analogy perceived between concrete relations—those of the rose petals, those of my sister and I—is difficult to speak of without some degree of abstraction, but in practice I needn’t appeal to an abstract concept such as that of “fitting relations” in order to perceive the analogy. That work is accomplished by the imagination. Here I am looking to Jan Zwicky’s work on metaphor and the imagination. She calls imagination “the capacity to experience meaningful coincidence of context, the arc of energy released when one context, laid across another, coincides in ways that refract back into individual contexts” (W&M 60L). Imagination allows me to perceive the metaphor, allows the context of the roses, laid across the context of my visit with my sister, to appear to me as a meaningful coincidence. The coincidence, refracting back into the individual contexts of rose and visit, can illuminate something about the visit. It can show me the possibility of fitting my responses to my sister’s needs and desires as best I can while we visit (and I may at least hope that she might do likewise). I can seek to be with her as one petal of the rose following the arc of the other.

Zwicky distinguishes this imaginative sensitivity from abstract thought, which itself is of two kinds, she says. One is “a grasp of structural features,” the other “the verbal manipulation of non-structurally conceived placeholders of a Lockean sort” (W&M 61L). Zwicky argues that there is a connection between imagination and the first kind of abstraction. Both begin, she says, in sensitivity to what is common. But in the case of imagination, she says, “‘what is common’ acts as the hinge of a gestalt shift—the rocking chair is ‘seen as’ the nest” (W&M 61L). My relation with my sister is ‘seen as’ the rose. In the case of abstraction, however, even abstraction of the first kind,
“‘[w]hat is common’ is hypostatized as a thing, rather than serving invisibly as the hinge or fulcrum around which understanding turns. In imagination, one shifts back and forth from chair to nest to chair to nest to chair to nest; but the static abstractions common in philosophy…eliminate movement. ‘What is common’ becomes itself the object of our attention, rather than the facilitator of attention to distinct-but-connected things. The things themselves fall away as unimportant—for we think in ‘abstracting’ what is common we have captured meaning” (W&M 62L).

Imagination doesn’t see what is common so much as it sees through what is common to the beings illuminated by the analogy. The meaning experienced through imaginative sensitivity can’t be abstracted from the particular contexts that make up the analogy; it exists in the movement of my attention from rocking chair to nest, from the relation with my sister to the rose, each term appearing in light of the other. The imagination focuses on the visit with my sister and on the rose outside the neighbour’s door, not on the abstract notion of “fitting relations.”

The upshot is that even when it comes to practicing a style of ethics that focuses on particular situations rather than on abstract concepts such as justice or fitting relations or an abstract moral idea à la Kant, experiences of perceptual beauty can nevertheless be illuminating. They can, as analogues, help me to see what the right course (or a right course) may be, as the rose does in the case of my sister’s visit. An ethical helpful analogy needn’t be restricted to that between an abstract and a perceptible entity; two perceptible entities or, as Zwicky has it, “contexts,” can be mutually illuminating. If one context has a directly ethical dimension such that I am called to ethical response (the visit), an appropriate analogy from another context (the rose) can help me to see how I might respond.

In considering the worth of the analogy between a fitting but not directly ethical beauty and ethical relation, we might also want to distinguish my actual responses in particular situations from general reflection on what constitutes ethical response, abstracted from a given situation. For the abstract concept of fitting relations is one that has emerged as I have engaged in such reflection here. It is abstract in the first of Zwicky’s two ways: it seeks to grasp structural aspects of ethical relations and to a large extent focuses on that abstraction, i.e. on the concept of
fitting relations. To the degree that this general reflection on fitting relations has ethical value, an analogy with beauty that aids that reflection will also be of ethical value.

One may wonder, of course, if we need recourse to beauty in order to reflect abstractly on the ethics of fitting relations. Kant argues that we need the analogy because there is no image to accompany the Kantian idea of the good. Our discussion of Scarry showed that beauty can supply a helpful if not strictly necessary concrete analogue of the relations characteristic of Rawlsian justice. But reflection on a particularistic ethic grounded in fitting relations might seem to have no need of the concretization or image offered by beauty qua perceptible fitting relations, for we can appeal to any number of concrete ethical situations as instantiations of the abstract concept of fitting relations. The situation here is similar to the one that emerged in the discussion of Scarry’s argument, where the synechdochal relation between concrete instances of elements of the total structure of a just society seemed to render the analogy with concrete beauties such as the poppy less useful, standing as the poppy does outside the context of societal relations while the assembly participates in that context, making its relation to justice much closer than that of the poppy.

As we saw in that instance, however, all kinds of support for seeing how ethically sound relations might be structured are valuable. And while it may be true that an analogy with beauty is not necessary to abstract reflection on fitting relations, it can certainly help us to grasp of the meaning of “fitting relations.” What is it generally to be in fitting relation with other beings or within a situation? One way of answering this question is to say that it is to fit into and around their/its ways of being as gracefully as the petals of my neighbour’s climbing roses arc around each other, complementarily.

But is reflection on the abstract formal relations characteristic of this particularistic ethic of any significance when it comes to the practice of seeking a fitting stance in a given situation? For if we are thinking of beauty as ethically relevant insofar as it aids this abstract contemplation, it will ultimately be of ethical value only if the abstract contemplation bears on the ethical practice we have in mind. And it needn’t; as I have indicated above, care-infused attention to particulars and responsiveness to the situation at hand may do the trick without appeal to the abstractions of theory. As Simone Weil says in Gravity and Grace, “We have to see things in their right relationship and ourselves, including the purposes we bear within us, as one of the terms of that
relationship. Action follows naturally from this” (43). By “see things in their right relationship” she doesn’t mean through appeal to an abstract concept of right relationship. In her notebooks she says, “[t]o know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself” (Simone Weil 234). The response follows directly from the caring act of attention, from loving perception of the man. Although concepts may be part of perception—the concepts of man and of hungry may be part of seeing the hungry man—the work of forming my response isn’t necessarily filtered through an ethical concept of fitting or “right” relationship. I may simply respond fittingly.

But abstracting the notion of fitting relations from the practice of engaging in such relations may yet be of value. For the capacity to attend to particulars and to attune oneself to the shape and dynamics of a given situation can be cultivated, just as one can cultivate an ear for music. And although one can’t make oneself sensitive to fit just by thinking about it, theoretical understanding of the ethical importance of creating and maintaining fitting relations may encourage us to develop and to use the skills of attention and attunement. So the analogy of beauty with relations ethical insofar as they are fitting can be of value in two ways. It can illuminate a concrete situation such as my sister’s visit, revealing a possible shape for our engagement. It can also support my understanding of the abstract concept of fitting relations, for in so doing it helps to motivate me to cultivate the sensitivity and attunement to particulars that creating and maintaining ethically fitting relations requires.

9 A Final Thought

Some might think that if ethics really calls for the focussing of my attention on my sister in order to respond to her in her particularity, I should be doing just that: focussing on her, not the rose. Especially if what Weil says is true, and I think it is: “[t]he capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle” (Waiting for God, 64). But the rose is a way of focussing on my sister. I focus on her through the rose; the rose helps me to see what a good fit between she and I might be.

A peculiar feature of analogy, in any case, is that my attention needn’t be devoted to one analogue over the other, for the analogues are mutually illuminating. Zwicky, above, says that when one has the ability to experience meaningful coincidence of context, an arc of energy is released that refracts back “into individual contexts”—both contexts (60L). And poet Don
McKay writes that metaphor “is a ferry whose passage one way always brings to mind the passage back” (72). He later refers to metaphor’s “recurrent back-and-forthing” (72). To see the rose better is to see my sister and I better…and to see my sister and I better is to see the rose better. Which brings me to my point: throughout this essay I have been arguing that the analogy between beauty and the moral idea (in Kant’s case) or between beauty and justice (in Scarry’s case) or between beauty and fitting ethical relations (in mine) is of value because it can, in one way or another, illuminate the ethical for us. Beauty can help us to picture an abstract ethical concept (Kant & Scarry’s proposal) and can help us to see how to respond in a particular context (my additional proposal). But just as a non-immediately ethical beauty can illuminate the ethical, so can the ethical illuminate the beautiful. It could be that part of the value of the analogy I have proposed is that it can help us out when it comes to grasping the character of the beautiful. If I am alert to the matter of fit when it comes to my relation to my sister and if I am analogically sensitive, the analogy may help me to grasp the fit of the rose petals.

One might object that this is not something I’d be likely to need help in seeing. But that is a debateable point—we are not always skilled perceivers, which is part of why we have art critics. Among their other roles, they help us to perceive: did you notice that the lines are blurrier near the edges than in the centre of the painting? Listen to the way in which long vowels are repeated throughout the poem. In any case, part of what it is to be a beautiful rose is to have petals that fit together beautifully in the way of a fitting ethical relation. To be a beautiful rose is in part to be an analogue of such a relation, so my grasp of the rose in its beauty is enriched when I grasp its relation to the ethical.

I have left this point till the end of the chapter because I agree with Levinas about the primacy of ethical life and have thus focussed on beauty as a support for ethics. I also tend to align myself with Peter Schjeldhal when he says that “beauty is a necessity that waits upon the satisfaction of other necessities” (59). But having discussed the ways in which beauty can be an analogue for different aspects of ethical life and can, as analogue, support ethical life, it is now fitting to observe that if we are open to the power of analogy, ethical relation can illuminate beauty as much as beauty can illuminate ethical relation.
Chapter 6  
Conclusion

1  The Three Relations

In the foregoing I have outlined three possible relations between beauty and ethics. Chapters two and three focus on beauty as an experience that can motivate ethical response. The following two consider beauty as a structure of fitting relations that either belongs to ethical relation and is hence part of what we aim at in aiming at ethical relation (chapter four) or functions as a perceptible analogue of such relation (chapter five).

I began in chapter two with the claim that experiences of beauty can cause us to move toward ethical responsiveness by “decentring us” such that we are no longer at the centre of our world and bring our attention instead to the beautiful. Beauty can elicit an other-centred attentiveness that Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch and Elaine Scarry each discuss as crucial to ethical relation. Although I didn’t claim that this relation between beauty and ethics is necessary, I did argue that the impact of an experience of beauty can be ethically significant in at least some cases.

The second sense in which beauty and ethics are connected emerged in chapter four, where I considered Aristotle’s approach to beauty and ethics in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here I argued that we can interpret this text such that the relation between beauty and ethics (ethics qua virtue or virtuous action) is one of formal causation. I argued that virtue and virtuous action just are beautiful, beautiful in structure or shape, i.e. beautiful in form; this beauty is beauty as the fitting (to prepon). Such beauty appears as a cause of ethical response in the sense that we aim at beautifully shaped or structured relations when we respond ethically. This relation between beauty and ethics can be motivational, and is in this way like the relation described in the second chapter. In this case, however, beauty is not so much psychologically motivating—inclining us toward ethical response—as it is motivating in the sense of providing an ethical aim. This beauty motivates sound ethical response from the position of desired end rather than that of initial experience.

Finally I considered the relation of analogy. I addressed three different approaches to both beauty and ethics, each of which reveals an analogical relation. The first is Kant’s claim that beauty is a symbol of morality, and I noted the substantial role he gives to analogy in the
theoretical cognition of moral concepts. I discussed his claim that abstract ideas need to be grounded—shown to have reality, made theoretically cognizable—through an intuition, and that the abstract ideas that are the basis of moral life can be shown to have reality through the beautiful because we have reason to see the beautiful as analogue of morality. I then turned to Elaine Scarry, who argues if not for the necessity (unlike Kant), at least for the epistemological and ethical usefulness of grounding abstract ethical concepts in intuitions. She sees beauty as characterized by symmetrical appearance, and she presents it as analogically related to a symmetrically structured justice. Finding Scarry’s account of beauty narrow and her account of justice lacking in complexity, I then proposed working with the broader account of beauty developed in the previous chapter, which examined the *Nicomachean Ethics*. If we take up an approach to beauty that sees it as formal insofar as it refers to relations of a certain shape or structure, i.e. to relations that are somehow fitting, and if we then go on to characterize beauty as perceptible—a common characterization—we find an analogical relation between beauty and an Aristotelian ethic that emphasizes fitting one’s response to the situation at hand.

We could describe these three takes on beauty as **beauty qua motivator of ethical relation, qua formal cause of ethical relation, qua analogue of ethical relation**. The first take allows for the broadest description of the class of the beautiful, as those beauties the experience of which can motivate ethical response include beauties both formal and contextual, criterial and non-criterial, symmetrical and asymmetrical, fleeting and timeless. The second take refers to a particular structure—that of fitting relation(s)—and the third refers to a structure of fitting relations that are perceptible. Although the second take is narrower than the first, and the third narrower yet, even the third—beauty as perceptibly fitting relation(s)—remains wide enough to allow for a range of actual relations and actually related beings to qualify as beautiful; as we saw, even this third take on beauty thus has the virtue of picking out more kinds of beauty and of ethical relation than Scarry’s focus on symmetry allows.

### 2 The Counter-Arguments

In discussing these three ways in which beauty is linked to ethics, we also encountered objections. In considering beauty as evoking decentred attention, we looked first at the problem of intrusive attention. I argued that intrusion is possible, but that attentiveness also allows us to see that attention is intrusive and to respond accordingly. I then considered counter-examples
provided by instances of envious, greedy or unjustifiably reifying attentions to beauty. I argued that these are also among the range of possible responses to beauty, but that they are ultimately attention to the self and thus involve a degree of phenomenological blindness, a lack of receptivity. It remains true, however, that one may respond to beauty with attention to the self, and because this is a real possibility, one most of us have either embodied or witnessed, I concluded that beauty does not necessarily give rise to decentred attention. But I maintained that in some cases, beauty can and does promote decentred attention, and that these cases are not ethically negligible.

I then considered two particular issues that arise when we consider formal beauty in particular as possibly decentring and thus as ethically helpful. The first of these issues I called “the problem of distraction,” whereby we may favour consideration of appearance over consideration of ethical position, either because we are blinded to a beautiful being’s ethically poor position or because we choose to ignore it. The second issue I called “the problem of rhetoric,” whereby we may mistakenly take the beautiful being’s appearance to be related to its ethical position and assume that its beauty reflects ethical goodness. We saw that each of these problems depends on the agent’s taking a particular view of the relation of appearance to a being’s other aspects, one that sees them as entirely separate (in the case of distraction) or one that mistakenly sees them as linked (in the case of rhetoric). With these requirements in mind, I then explored Nehamas’ challenge to the idea that a being’s appearance and its other aspects are necessarily separate; I argued, however, that if sometimes joined, they are also sometimes separate, so distraction and rhetoric remain real possibilities. I also endorsed Dave Hickey’s claim that distraction can be an antidote to rhetoric, though I pointed out limitations on the range of cases in which it is ethically helpful. My conclusion was that formal beauty can be ethically problematic, but given its possible benefits—both ethical and non-ethical—I recommended developing sensitivity to the relation between a being’s appearance and its other aspects rather than fostering a desensitization to beauty, especially given the harm to self that desensitization can bring.

When we then turned to beauty in the Aristotelian sense of the fitting and considered its role as the formal cause of ethical relation, we encountered objections of two kinds. One consisted of counter-examples. We considered the possibility of ethical response that does not appear beautiful in the sense of fitting, looking first at Lear’s objection to description of the burial of one’s parents as beautiful, then at the example of self-immolation in protest. In both cases we
found that the examples were more complex than they may have at first appeared. I uncovered a sense in which the burial of one’s parents both is and is not beautiful, is and is not fitting. The case of self-immolation also proved to be a mix of fitting and unfitting elements such that the act is ethically sound in one sense and harmful in another. But the act remains ethical sound insofar as it is fitting and unsound insofar as it isn’t; the relation between the ethical and the fitting thus remains coherent.

We then considered the perspective offered by alterity-based ethics, from which point of view there may also emerge objections to associating the fitting with the ethical. I identified three such objections. One was a worry that seeing the ethical as the fitting overlooks the ethical importance of experiencing the Otherness of the Other. The second was the worry that my account neglects the possibility of an ethical action that exceeds the confines of the fitting. Finally, we considered the worry that to present a response as fitting was to present it as sufficient, whereas Levinas emphasizes the infinitude of responsibility such that no response is sufficient. I argued in the first case that respect for Otherness counts as a fitting response and that the concept of an entirely opaque Other is ethically unhelpful if it leaves us blind to needs or interests that require response. In the second case I argued that so-called excessive ethical responses can yet be described as fitting. In the third case I argued that the notion of fitting response is compatible with the notion of infinite responsibility if we think of it as part of infinite response.

Having considered both sources of objections to thinking of beauty qua the fitting as the formal cause of ethical response, I saw no reason to limit beauty’s capacity to function as such a cause.

When the discussion then turned to beauty’s role as analogue of ethical relation, I built on the Aristotelian discussion, so many of the possible objections were the same as those discussed above. But additional questions centred on the effectiveness of analogy; these arose partly from Dennis Dutton’s rejection of Elaine Scarry’s analogy between beauty and justice. I argued that the analogy between beauty and ethics can be effective, and that its degree of effectiveness depends partly on the sensitivity of the agent. I argued that the possible ethical support offered by the beauty analogue suggests the ethical advisability of developing analogical sensitivity where it is lacking.
In the end, objections to the three beauty-ethics relations I presented sometimes revealed limitations on these relations, but none gave us reason to entirely dismiss any of the three relations as being either necessarily ethically harmful or without possible ethical benefit. As Jan Zwicky observes, the recognition of limits is a characteristic of wisdom, and I have attempted to be wise in my arguments. But wisdom does not mean dismissing the possibilities that may emerge within limitations, and I have asserted those possibilities where they exist, while also taking note of possible ethical pitfalls.

3 Beauty and Moral Particularism

As noted in the introduction, each of the three kinds of relation I have charted between beauty and ethics relates beauty to a particularistic ethic, one that emphasizes the need to be sensitive to the particular and possibly unique features of a given situation. A tendency toward particularism emerges in the relatively contemporary ethics of Weil, Murdoch and Scarry discussed in chapter two; it emerges also in the ancient ethic of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, on which I relied in describing beauty as the formal cause of ethical relation and as analogue of such relation, in chapters four and five respectively. We might now pause to wonder why this relation of beauty to particularism should exist.

The most obvious source for an answer is beauty’s long-standing association with the particular. Even a thinker as committed to the realm of the purely intelligible as Plato calls beauty “the most clearly visible” of the forms (*Phaedrus* 250D-E). Such perceptibility is usually thought to belong to particular concrete beings; to be seen is to be seen as *a this*. Kant, for his part, insists on the particularity of the object deemed beautiful, for he claims that there is no concept adequate to the thing’s beauty—all we have is the intuition, the image of the beautiful *this*, whose beauty we judge based on our subjective experience of pleasure in its presence rather than on any generalizable, abstract criterion that someone not present to the particular object of judgement could also use as a basis for judgement. The object judged beautiful is one “the form of which...is judged as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object” (5:190). I deem an object beautiful not in virtue of some generalizable criterion/a but in virtue of a given

54 “Wisdom is thought conditioned by an awareness of limits on the systematically provable, articulable, or demonstrable” (“Dream Logic” 45).
intuition that generates a certain kind of subjective experience. Indeed, the judgement of beauty is defined by Kant as a species of what he calls “reflective judgement,” which begins from particulars and moves toward generals, although in the case of judgements of beauty the general is never arrived at (20:211).

There is another sense in which the Kantian judgement of beauty contains a move toward the general. The Kantian judgement of beauty is peculiar in that although what emerges from the experience of the particular is a subjective judgement of beauty, it is a judgement for which I claim “subjective universality,” i.e. I claim that everyone should agree with my judgement (5:212). There is thus a move to the general. But significantly, I don’t generalize about what kinds of things are beautiful only about who should find this object beautiful based on their experience of it in its particularity (more accurately, based on the feeling of pleasure that the object causes by way of the free play generated between the faculties). The particular remains key; the judgement concerning beauty remains a judgement about a particular. One might wonder, however, whether this move to the general imperils my proposal that beauty qua pertaining to particulars leads to moral particularism. Regardless of whether Kant is right that a claim to universality is part of a judgement of beauty (and it’s by no means clear that he is, given that the claim to universality is based on the controversial notion of a “common sense”), he highlights the possibility that a focus on a particular being may yield a general claim, and this suggests that a link between beauty qua pertaining to particulars and moral particularism may not be necessary (5:237-9). But I am making no claim to necessity. I am only suggesting that beauty’s traditional association with particulars might explain the links that do exist—as I have demonstrated—between beauty and moral particularism.

Nehamas, for his part, takes the opposite tack: it is on the basis of the link of beauty with particularity that he rejects association of beauty with ethics. He quotes art critic Arnold Isenberg: “[t]here is no in all the world’s criticism a single purely descriptive statement concerning which one is prepared to say beforehand, ‘If it is true, I shall like that work so much the better’” (47). This is a beautiful rephrasing of Kant’s view. But Nehamas assumes that morality works in an opposite direction: “the values of aesthetics aspire toward distinction and individuality, the values of morality are grounded on similarity and connectedness. For that reason, beauty and morality come into conflict” (137). Nehamas dismisses the beauty-ethics connection too soon, however, for as we have seen, not all approaches to ethics see ethics as in
some way generalizable such that principles can be applied across situations. Nehamas forgets the tradition of particularistic ethics, where ethical response is not grounded in similarity but in sensitivity to a situation’s possibly unique features, or to features of variable valence such that they may work in a particular way in a given context and in another way in another context. This version of ethics is compatible with beauty in ways I have shown.

One might pause, however, to wonder just how particularistic are the views of beauty that I have been working with. The last relation presented, that of analogy, explicitly conceives of beauty as perceptible. Such beauty thus clearly belongs to a particular, to a perceived this. But what of the other two?

The first relation presented, that between beauty and ethically helpful decentred attention, allows for a relatively wide swath of beings to qualify as beautiful, encompassing as it does both contextual and art-critically formal beauties, as well as criterial and non-criterial beauties. I did not mention particulars, which may lead us to think that the beauty on which this account of a relation to ethics depends is not necessarily the beauty of a particular. Yet if we examine it, we find that this account depends on our having experience of the beautiful, encounters with particular instances of beauty: with the kestrels and cherry trees and vases of the world.

On the other hand, Simone Weil emphasizes academic study, including the study of math, as an experience that can promote decentred attention (WG 63). Mathematical equations or proofs are often considered beautiful—recall the words of mathematician Kevin Costello in chapter five—and if math is an activity that considers numerical and geometrical relations in abstraction from particular beings and situations, there is a sense in which decentring beauty may belong to the realm of the abstract as opposed to the particular. If Weil is right, it would seem that attention to an abstract beauty could result in the decentred attention she advocates for as a crucial ethical habit. So there is room in this account for an abstract beauty to encourage decentred attention.

In this instance, then, we have an exception to the link I am suggesting may exist between the beauty of particulars and moral particularism: an abstract beauty may promote moral particularism.

Without denying this exception, however, we might observe degrees of particularity within the realm of the abstract. There is a sense in which a mathematical relation, though an abstraction from particulars, is itself a particular relative to other abstractions. One must experience the
beauty of *this* math problem or *this* proof in order to be decentred. But again, the thisness of abstractions is relative only to other abstractions, and their beauty exists at some degree of abstraction from concrete particulars. This degree of abstraction in a beauty that can elicit decentred attention suggests that if there is a link between beauty and particularism in virtue of beauty’s frequent association with particulars, this association may not be the only reason for the link. There may also be experiences of beauty at a relatively general level that promote the decentred attention to particulars that Weil, Murdoch and Scarry describe.

The second of the beauty-ethics relations I discussed sees the beautiful as the fitting. And in this case too, beauty may not seem to be necessarily linked with the particular; it may seem that on this account there may exist beings and acts we can describe as fitting such that their beauty can be judged in abstraction from experience of them in their full particularity. My example of the gesture of giving one’s seat to a pregnant woman may be such a case. Yet it’s possible—likely, even, given its bare bones—that my description is incomplete. We can imagine a host of additional particular details that might disqualify the act from being characterized as fitting: perhaps it’s important to the woman to be treated like everyone else; perhaps she is standing in the shade whereas my seat will be uncomfortably sunny and hot; perhaps I’m actually more tired than she is... It remains possible that the fittingness—and hence the beauty—of my act in offering the seat is tied to an unending complexity of the particular situation in which the woman and I find ourselves such that it cannot be abstracted from these particulars.

Assessment of what’s fitting or appropriate is in any case explicitly contrasted by Aristotle with ethical determinations based on generalities: “[s]ince the general account lacks precision, the account at the level of particulars is even less precise. For they do not come under any skill or set of rules: agents must always look at what is appropriate in each case as it happens” (*NE* 1104a). The concept of the appropriate emerges in opposition to an account of ethics that relies—or relies exclusively—on the general. In the context in which I discussed it, then, the fitting—and the beautiful as the fitting—refers to the character of a concrete particular situation. As a concept it refers to the realm of concrete particulars. And because my use of the concept takes place within the context provided by Aristotle, I too am considering the fitting and the beautiful-qua-the-fitting as concepts that belongs to the realm of the particular as opposed to the general. Even so, there remains the question of whether an account of the beautiful as the fitting may be extracted from the context of Aristotle’s discussion and applied within the realm of the
general such that a relation could be discerned between a beauty of the general and a more
generalistic approach to ethics than those I have discussed. This extraction certainly seems
possible, and although it looks beyond the discussion I have offered, it bears further
investigation.

It seems, then, that beauty understood to pertain to particulars may for that reason bear the kinds
of relation to moral particularism that I have described. But there is room in the Weil-Murdoch-
Scarry argument to see relatively abstract beauties as supporting the decentred attention to others
that moral particularism emphasizes. There also remains the possibility of uncovering links
between beauty of the abstract and generalism, for the beauty-ethics relations I have presented
are not necessarily exhaustive. Nevertheless, the links between the versions of beauty I have
discussed and the particular are strong, and it remains that at least one reason for the link
between beauty and particularism may be that beauty is often understood to be part of the same
realm as that of moral particularism, i.e. that of particulars.

4 What’s in a Name?

Since I began working on beauty seven years ago, I have been involved in formal and informal
discussions of beauty with both career philosophers and other interested parties. I have found
that when the role of beauty in ethical life has been broached, it has often involved
disagreements, but many of these disagreements emerged from differences in definition or
description of beauty. In the introduction I pointed out some of the commonest contradictory
pairs of characterizations of beauty, including the powerful and powerfully contrasting traditions
stemming from Plato and Kant respectively. I have approached the differences in conceptions of
beauty by allowing them to stand, have allowed the concept to contain contradictions and have
taken up different threads and followed them when those threads appeared to lead in the
direction of ethics.

As it happens, I didn’t in the end refer to accounts of beauty that were strikingly incompatible.
Indeed, the last two takes on beauty—beauty as the fitting and beauty as the perceptibly fitting—
can be seen as genus and species. And the first account of beauty, which emerged in the
argument about decentred attention, was relatively unspecific, making it easily compatible with
the other two. But given the room I have given to different approaches to beauty, especially
within the chapter on decentred attention, one might wonder at the end of the day exactly what I
am discussing. Are different accounts of beauty joined by anything but a name? Do they have the same name in virtue of anything inherently common or is the shared name a purely contingent phenomenon?

I could have pre-empted this question by restricting my concept of beauty to that of the fitting and using that to discuss each of the relations I discerned. The decentring argument applies to experiences beauty qua the fitting, and the discussion of analogy focuses on a particular kind of fitting relation: the perceptible fitting relation. But this approach would have been artificial. Not only would it have meant an unnecessary narrowing of the applicability of the decentring argument, restricting beauty’s ethical relevance, but it would also have hidden the differences and confusions internal to the concept.

I don’t, however, have an answer to the question about what links what appear to be vastly different and even contradictory approaches to beauty. I suspect that the peculiar layering of different and even contradictory accounts of what counts as beautiful within the concept may have a historical explanation rather than a theoretical one. But I highlight the internal incoherence as a puzzling aspect of the concept of beauty, and one that bears further study. It would be worth exploring to what degree these accounts are reconcilable. It’s possible, for instance, that Plato’s love-inducing beauty and Kant’s disinterested approach to beauty may be reconciled through careful interpretation of Kant’s discussion of beauty as symbol of morality and of natural beauty as interesting to moral people. Perhaps Kantian beauty is not associated only with disinterest and is not as strictly cut off from judgements of the good as we might initially think.

But even if resolution is possible in the case of the arguments of these specific figures, there remains an association of beauty with disinterest and an association of beauty with interest, and although these associations may have stemmed from accounts offered by Kant and Plato, they now exist independently of those accounts. Even if Kant can be shown to present an account of beauty that involves interest, the association with disinterestedness now has a life of its own. The concept may thus have outgrown its conflicting origins, in which case resolution would depend on more than a resolution at the origins. It may be as Eaton argues with regard to the differences between what she calls Kantian and contextual beauties, that “it would be better, that is, our conversations would be clearer and less misleading, if we were to admit that there are two
strongly entrenched senses of the word ‘beauty’ and were moved to replace one of them with another word,” although she admits that language reform is problematic, especially with a word as deeply entrenched in the language as ‘beauty’ is (“Kantian and Contextual Beauty” 35).

An extensive investigation of historical usage and of the possible theoretical compatibility of apparently opposed accounts of what counts as beauty could help us either to separate conversations that are rightly separate or to clarify in what sense they are one. But this is an enormous task, one likely to require contributions from and long debate between several different voices, and I haven’t taken it on because the issue doesn’t present a large problem for my current investigation, which doesn’t depend on a single coherent account of beauty but looks at links between different versions of beauty and ethics. Even in the case of the decentring argument, which pertains to beauties of conflicting description, the argument doesn’t hinge on relations between those beauties—formal and contextual, criterial and non-criterial. It depends only on our having an experience of at least one of those versions of beauty that is decentring.

In lieu of a comprehensive study of the conflicts and possible resolutions among different versions of what counts as beautiful, I have made an effort both to be clear about which version I am using and to acknowledge the presence of other versions with an equally legitimate historical claim on the concept. I emphasize ‘and’ because I haven’t wished to define ‘beauty’ then work in a linguistic bubble, as though there were no other conflicting way of understanding beauty. The bubble approach is tempting because it tends to make one’s arguments about beauty look stronger, more broadly applicable than they may actually be. But given a concept riven with profound internal contradictions, acknowledgement of multiplicity and hence of the limitations on each of the relations to ethics I presented seemed wise; it seemed the most honest and most illuminating approach.
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