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Abstract

Human beauty is no issue of contemporary aesthetics. To (re-)approach this topic philosophically, this paper outlines three different answers to the question whether human beauty comes from within. According to a body-centred theory, human beauty solely depends on a person's physical appearance. More precisely, human beauty is identified with high physical attractiveness. A dualist theory distinguishes the 'outer' beauty of the physical appearance from the 'inner' beauty of the character of a person. So a beautiful person has to be outwardly and inwardly beautiful, that is, she has to be highly physically attractive and has to have an amiable character. According to a character-expressionist theory, human beauty is bound to the appearance of a person, but visible signs of a person's character influence how someone appears to us. So a beautiful person is not only highly physically attractive, but shows signs of an amiable character. This paper argues for a character-expressionist theory. Both the body-centred and the dualist theory assume that we can perceive a person's mere physical appearance. But if we see someone as a human being, we are aware of the human duality between physical appearance and character. This awareness hampers us to perceive them separately because we interpret certain facial expressions and gestures as expressions of a person's character. A character-expressionist theory embraces this inseparability-problem. Furthermore, such a theory can explain two seemingly contradictory intuitions, namely how beauty can be only skin-deep and can come from within.

Whereas human beauty (and also beauty in general)² is no big issue of contemporary aesthetics, it is a big issue of our society. The mass media seem to obsess over beautiful people; at least, compared to real life, they definitely over-represent good-looking people.³ And many of us, women as well as men, wish to become or stay beautiful and invest a lot of time, energy, and also money in their personal looks. Asked for reasons, one can hear that beauty is so important because it promises happiness. Beautiful people have advantages in their private and also professional life, advantages, which many of us associate with a good, happy life. Beautiful people more easily find a partner; beautiful children and students are better marked; beautiful job candidates are more likely to get the job and will earn more money than their not so good-looking colleagues; and so on.⁴ Therefore it is not unreasonable to wish to be beautiful and to try with different means to achieve this goal. But what are the right means to become beautiful. Should one only care about one's physical appearance? Underlying this question is another more basic one. Does only the outward, physical appearance of a person matter for her beauty, or does also her character play a role? In other words, does human beauty come from within? The aim of this paper is to sketch three different, but connected answers to this question: a body-centred, a dualist, and a character-expressionist answer. And it will argue in favour of a character-expressionist solution.

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² See, e.g., Stolnitz, "Beauty: Some Stages in the History of an Idea," 185.

³ See Gugenberger, *Einfach Schön*, 104.

⁴ See, e.g., Hamermesh, *Beauty Pays*; Gugenberger, *Einfach Schön*; Renz, *Schönheit*.

I. An empirical-grounded, body-centred answer

It is a widespread belief that the beauty of a person solely depends on how her body and face look like. The proverb “Beauty is only skin deep” reflects this belief. And this is also the basic idea behind a body-centred theory of human beauty.⁵

The empirical research on attractiveness ties in with this basic idea and tries to answer the question how someone has to look like in order to be beautiful. For this purpose, it first assumes that a beautiful person is a physically attractive one, and then shows that what one person finds attractive is not so different from what another person finds attractive. Empirical research has identified some interpersonal and intercultural stable features of human attractiveness, for example, youthfulness, clear complexion, symmetry, averageness, and for women a waist-to-hip ratio of 0,7 and a childlike face.⁶ Considered evolutionarily, we find these features attractive because they are reliable signs of fitness and promise reproductive success.⁷ So physical attractiveness can be explained in objective terms.

This empirical-grounded, body-centred theory has to meet at least three objections. First, beauty seems to be much more exclusive than attractiveness. The threshold to call someone beautiful is much higher than the threshold to call someone attractive.⁸ This objection can be met if beauty is not simply attractiveness, but high attractiveness.⁹ But if judging someone to be highly attractive means that one feels a strong sexual desire, this also seems to be wrong.¹⁰ I can strongly sexually desire a person who I do not find beautiful. And I can judge a person to be beautiful without sexually desiring her. If I am happily married, for example, I may only sexually desire my partner, but I can still see the beauty of other persons. Or a heterosexual man or woman can be able to see the beauty of another man or woman. But attractiveness does not have to be understood in mere sexual terms. If one judges a person to be physically attractive, the sight of this other person (immediately) pleases, one is drawn towards this person, becomes interested in her, and certain desires are triggered, I assume. Seeing an attractive person can trigger the wish to get to know this person and form a relationship, not necessarily a sexual one, with her. I assume that it is hard to think of a person who we judge to be beautiful, but is not in this wider sense attractive.

Secondly, one might wonder whether it is indeed possible to fully decode the “secret of beauty” in terms of objective features of attractiveness. In the history of philosophical aesthetics, trying to find an objective beauty formula has proved to be a rather frustrating business. Beauty formulas seem either to be too broad, too narrow, or too vague. A defender of the empirical-grounded theory can admit that it is difficult to find a general beauty formula, but add that she is only concerned with a formula of human beauty. With the help of empirical investigations and

⁵ See Levinson, “Beauty Is Not One,” § IV.

⁶ For a more detailed overview of the results of the empirical research on attractiveness see, e.g., Gründel, “Attraktivitätsforschung: Auf der Suche nach der Formel der Schönheit”; Renz, *Schönheit*, part I.

⁷ See, e.g., Menninghaus, *Das Versprechen der Schönheit*, chap. I/II.

⁸ See Levinson, “Beauty Is Not One,” § IV.

⁹ See, e.g., Campell, Converse and Rodgers, *The Quality of American Life*, 400.

¹⁰ See Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 83.

biological explanations, we can explain some day what makes a person beautiful.¹¹ But is this so? One can admit that empirical research has found some typical features of attractiveness, but question whether they ever can be put together in a generally valid formula of human beauty. Sometimes a little ‘imperfection’, a little ‘flaw’ contributes to the beauty of a person, although the same feature does not tend to beautify someone else. Think for example of Brigitte Bardot’s tooth gap or Cindy Crawford’s beauty spot above her mouth. And, secondly, if one tries to explain what makes a person beautiful, mostly something unexplainable remains. The beauty of a person partly depends on something special, on a kind of mysterious, unpredictable x-factor, it seems. So also human beauty might be never be fully decoded.

This consideration does not defeat the whole empirical-grounded, body-centred theory, only its aspiration to fully decode human beauty in objective terms. Generally considered, a remarkable feature of judgements of beauty is that they can neither be fully explained in mere objective, nor in mere subjective terms.¹² On the one side, judgements of beauty seem to be subjective. As the well-known proverb “There is no accounting for taste” states, arguing about judgements of beauty is kind of pointless. Judgements of beauty depend on whether something pleases us, on whether we love something, on whether we are attracted by something. And, as we have just seen, we have a hard time trying to formulate any general beauty formulas. In the end, beauty remains unexplainable. However, a fully subjective account does not convince: people tend to search for objective features of beautiful objects, and this search is not totally vain. They also argue with each other if they disagree on matters of beauty. If someone judges something to be beautiful, she wants to say more than that the objects simply pleases her. She demands from others to agree. I would say that a theory of beauty should embrace this shifting between subjective and objective explanation-modes. The empirical-grounded, body-centred theory does justice to the subjectivity of judgements of beauty by saying that beauty is high attractiveness, and it does justice to the objectivity of judgements of beauty by partly explaining beauty in terms of objective features of attractiveness.

The third objection raises the initial question of this paper: is the body-centred theory right that human beauty does only depend on the physical appearance? Asked for reasons why someone finds a person beautiful, of course, bodily and facial features are mentioned, but one often also refers to the character of the other person. It seems as if the character of a person at least partly influences her beauty. The body-centred theory cannot grasp this intuition.

II. A dualist answer

The last point leads to the second answer to the question whether human beauty comes from within. A dualist theory distinguishes between two kinds of human beauty, the ‘outer’ beauty of the physical appearance and the ‘inner’ beauty of the character (or soul) of a person. To be truly and fully beautiful it is not enough to be only physically beautiful, but one should also be inwardly beautiful. This reflects the ancient ideal of the *kalokagathía*:

¹¹ See, e.g., Gründel, “Attraktivitätsforschung: Auf der Suche nach der Formel der Schönheit,” 69-70.

¹² See, e.g., Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste*; Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 56.

Then [...] when there is a coincidence of a beautiful disposition in the soul and corresponding and harmonious beauties of the same type in the bodily form—is not this the fairest spectacle for one who is capable of its contemplation?¹³

What kind of character is called beautiful? An answer to this question should fulfil two conditions. First, it should embrace our pre-theoretical intuitions about which character traits are relevant for the attribution of inner beauty. Secondly, it should explain why such a character (and only such a character) is called beautiful.

Inner beauty is often equated with moral beauty:¹⁴ a person is inwardly beautiful insofar as she has moral character traits, that is, insofar as she reliably acts (thinks and feels) morally. However, this proposal does not do justice to our intuitions about inner beauty. First, it does not mention the motivation behind an action. But an inwardly beautiful person does not only act morally only because she feels obliged to.¹⁵ Rather she acts morally out of concern and love for others. And also a certain degree of easiness is important. An inwardly beautiful person does not struggle too much to act morally. Schiller speaks of a beautiful soul if to act morally has become someone's second nature.¹⁶ Furthermore, not all moral actions equally matter for the attribution of inner beauty. To pay one's taxes seems to be less important than to help another person in need, for example. And not only moral character traits are important. Intelligence, humour, or optimism, for example, are also mentioned if one speaks about a beautiful character.¹⁷

The philosophical roots of speaking about inner beauty lie in Plato's writings. Plato claims that the good is beautiful.¹⁸ In this sense, a good, that is, virtuous character is a beautiful one. Connecting this idea with Aristotle's theory of virtue, this proposal embraces our intuitions about inner beauty rather well. First, possessing a virtue means that one acts according to this virtue without much struggle and takes pleasure in the virtuous action.¹⁹ Secondly, Aristotle's list of virtues not only comprises in a narrow sense moral virtues. Also socially desirable virtues like good temper or friendliness are included.²⁰ And by stressing the importance of the intellectual virtues one can come to terms with the idea that also intelligence and skilfulness make someone inwardly beautiful. The only shortcoming of this proposal is that it cannot explain why not all morally virtuous character traits and their corresponding actions are equally important for the attribution of inner beauty.

Aside from this problem, one might ask why such an Aristotelian virtuous character and only such a character is a beautiful one. In *Gorgias*, a possible justification is shortly mentioned: a virtuous character is especially ordered.²¹ And in the *Republic*, a virtuous character is called

¹³ Plato, *Republic*, 402d.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Berkeley, *Alciphron*, 120-121; Cooper, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 14; Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 5; McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, chap. 5.

¹⁵ See Schiller, *Kallias oder über die Schönheit. Über Anmut und Würde*, 29.

¹⁶ See Schiller, *Kallias oder über die Schönheit. Über Anmut und Würde*, 111.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 120; Reid, "Essay VIII of Taste," 792.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Plato, *Symposium*, 201c.

¹⁹ See Aristotle, *Nikomachische Ethik*, 1104 b; 1105 b.

²⁰ See Aristotle, *Nikomachische Ethik*, book IV.

²¹ See Plato, *Gorgias*, 506e.

harmonious.²² According to a classical theory of beauty, beauty depends on harmony and order.²³ The reciprocity thesis might explain in which sense a virtuous character is especially ordered and harmonious: if you have one virtue, you have all of them.²⁴ Virtues hang together. You cannot take one apart without destroying the whole unity of a virtuous character. This seems to speak for a special order and harmony among the virtues. However, the reciprocity thesis is rather contra-intuitive.²⁵ And it is therefore in need of a good justification. Aristotle gives the following justification of this thesis. Possessing a virtue implies being prudent, and if you are prudent, then you have all of the other virtues.²⁶ But Aristotle also argues that a self-restrained person is prudent, but not fully virtuous.²⁷ This leads to a weaker claim: if someone has acquired one virtue, she is prudent and has thereby acquired the prerequisite of all other virtues.²⁸ But if a virtuous character is ordered and harmonious in this sense, then one would have to call a person who has acquired only one virtue beautiful, and this is contra-intuitive, I assume.

Burke proposes another analysis of inner beauty. He connects beauty with love.²⁹ Hence a beautiful character is an amiable character:³⁰

Those [virtues] which engage our hearts, which impress us with a sense of loveliness, are the softer virtues; easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality [...]³¹

Burke does not think of love in purely sexual terms.³² So, one can develop his idea further and say that an amiable character is in the above-mentioned sense attractive. An attractive character trait draws you towards the person bearing this character trait and triggers the wish to form a relationship with this person. In other words, an attractive, amiable character trait is a character trait we are looking for in good friends.

This proposal fulfils the first requirement for an analysis of inner beauty even better than the virtue-analysis. Virtuous and moral character traits matter for friendship.³³ But not all of them matter equally.³⁴ Helping another person, being generous, or loyal count more than honesty in tax matters. It also helps to explain why the motivation behind an action matters. A friend is expected to chose a moral action not only because she feels obliged to do so, but because she really cares for another person.³⁵ Furthermore, also humour, optimism, and a certain degree of

²² See Plato, *Republic*, 402d.

²³ See, e.g., Tatarkiewicz, "The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline."

²⁴ See Aristotle, *Nikomachische Ethik*, 1144 b 36–1145 a 1.

²⁵ See, e.g., Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 36.

²⁶ See Aristotle, *Nikomachische Ethik*, 1144 b 36–1145 a 1.

²⁷ See Aristotle, *Nikomachische Ethik*, 1152 a.

²⁸ See also Telfer, "The Unity of the Moral Virtues in Aristotle's 'Nicomachean Ethics'," 40.

²⁹ See Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 83.

³⁰ See also Reid, "Essay VIII of Taste," 791.

³¹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 100.

³² See Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 83.

³³ See, e.g., Aristoteles, *Nikomachische Ethik*, 1156 b; Kant, „Freundschaft als Maximum der Wechselliebe."

³⁴ See, e.g., Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 100; Reid, "Essay VIII of Taste," 792.

³⁵ See, e.g., Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," 212-215.

intelligence are often mentioned as important for friendship.³⁶ They tend to make interpersonal relationships easier and more interesting.

This proposal can also give two explanations why we call such an amiable character beautiful. First, a beautiful character and a beautiful body are both attractive in the sense that they evoke pleasurable sensations and trigger the wish to get to know that person and to form a relationship with her. Secondly, the current proposal can explain why also judgements of inner beauty evade purely subjective as well as purely objective explanations, and this is a remarkable feature of judgements of beauty. Friendship is a personal matter strongly depending on our affection for another person. And it is up to a certain degree unexplainable.³⁷ Montaigne writes in his essay "Of Friendship:"

If a man should importune me to give a reason why I loved him, I find it could no otherwise be expressed, than by making answer: *because it was he, because it was I.*³⁸

But friendship is not totally unexplainable. Since the antiquity, philosophers have searched for and have formulated typical features of good friendship, thereby stressing the objectivity of friendship. And if I think that someone would be a good friend, I am prepared to argue with you if you disagree.

If one accepts this analysis of inner beauty, one can formulate a dualist view on human beauty: a person is beautiful if she is highly physically attractive and has an amiable character. But one might object that such a dualist theory makes the mistake to understand the proverb "True beauty comes from within" too literally and overlooks that speaking about inner beauty can only be meant metaphorically.

But neither common intuitions, nor the philosophical debate agrees on whether 'inner beauty' is a metaphor. If one adopts the dualist interpretation of the proverb "True beauty comes from within," inner beauty is literal beauty. Otherwise it could not be true beauty. But the also already mentioned proverb "Beauty is only skin deep" contradicts this assumption. Philosophical discourse reflects this disagreement. Some writers treat inner beauty as a metaphor like, for example, Kant or Burke;³⁹ some as literal beauty like, for example, Plato or Gaut;⁴⁰ and some even as the prototype of beauty like, for example, Plotin, Reid, or Cousin.⁴¹

For Gaut, only if something blocks a literal interpretation, 'inner beauty' should be considered to be a metaphor.⁴² What could block a literal interpretation? First, beauty strikes quite immediately.⁴³ We do not have to think much about whether something is beautiful. We simply see or hear it. This leads to the second feature of beauty: beauty depends (at least partly) on

³⁶ See, e.g., Reid, "Essay VIII of Taste," 792.

³⁷ See, e.g., Telfer, "Friendship," 226.

³⁸ Montaigne, "Of Friendship," paragraph 12 (my italics).

³⁹ See, e.g., Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 101-102; Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, AA V 353.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 114-127; Plato, *Symposium*.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Alision, *Essays on the nature and principles of taste*; Cousin *The Philosophy of the Beautiful*. Plotinus, "On Beauty"; Reid, "Essay VIII of Taste".

⁴² See Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 124.

⁴³ See, e.g., Addison, *The Spectator*; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 211; Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, 25.

direct sensory perception, normally on visual or acoustical perception, one might think.⁴⁴ These two features support a metaphorical interpretation of inner beauty. First, one needs time to get to know a person, to understand what kind of person she is and what character traits she has. One cannot immediately perceive a person's inner beauty, as one cannot immediately decide on whether someone would be a good friend and behaves like one. And secondly, one cannot directly see or hear the character of a person. One has to deduce from the behaviour, actions, and statements of a person what kind of character she has. So one cannot immediately and directly see (or hear) the inner beauty of a person.

III. A character-expressionist answer

Besides the question whether 'inner beauty' is a metaphor, another problem arises for the dualist theory and also for the body-centred theory. Both theories assume that it is possible to perceive the *mere physical* appearance of a person. But think of an everyday situation in which you meet another person. Even if you try to concentrate only on her physical appearance, I assume, you rather quickly start to think about what kind of person she is. We have learned from experience to read certain facial expressions and gestures as expressions of the character of a person. We see the look in someone's eyes, and this gives us clues to what kind of person she is, or at least we hope so. So how someone appears to us does not only depend on bodily features, or as Nehamas says:

In other words, psychological and bodily features interpenetrate [...]⁴⁵

Why is this so? If we see someone as a human being, we know that the body that we see is animated. This brings along the awareness of a kind of human duality. We tend to distinguish between the outward appearance and the inner life of a person, or between her body and character. Seeing someone as a person means to be aware that she is more than her looks. And exactly this awareness makes it so difficult to focus on the mere physical appearance of a person. We immediately start to look for visible signs of what kind of person someone is. In short, the appearance of a person never is the mere physical appearance.

This inseparability-problem does not claim that it is per se impossible to judge human beings only based on their visible physical features. Under certain circumstances, this might be possible. If I show you a photo of a nude person, standing in front of a monochrome wall, looking at you with the most neutral facial expression, you might be able to concentrate on her mere physical appearance. But such a situation is rather artificial.

If the inseparability-problem describes an observation about how we tend to perceive other human beings, why is this important for a theory of human beauty? A theory of human beauty should help to understand judgements like "X is a beautiful person." or "Person x is beautiful." And if such a theory analyses human beauty at least partly as mere physical beauty, it assumes that it is possible judge human beings only based on their physical appearance. But if this is only

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Addison, *The Spectator*; Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 83; Zangwill, "Aesthetic/Sensory Dependence," 127-145.

⁴⁵ Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, 68.

possible under exceptional circumstances, most of our statements about human beauty remain unexplained. Therefore, a theory of human beauty should embrace the inseparability-problem.

A character-expressionist theory of human beauty can do this job. The basic idea behind such a theory is that one should give up the clear distinction between the 'outer' beauty of the physical appearance and 'inner' beauty of the character. Such a distinction cannot be drawn because the appearance of a person is not only her physical appearance. Reading some bodily and facial movements as visible signs of a person's character influence how someone appears to us. But signs of what kind of character do positively influence our judgements of beauty?

Kant gives an answer to this question. The beauty of a human being is an example of dependent beauty.⁴⁶ A judgement of dependent beauty presupposes "a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it."⁴⁷ What this means if the object is a human being, § 17 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* makes clearer. The ideal of beauty turns out to be an ideal of human beauty.⁴⁸ The outward appearance of an ideally beautiful human being conforms to the aesthetic normal idea. This is the image of a standard, average human being.⁴⁹ Assumedly, this makes someone physically attractive.⁵⁰ But because perfection means that something fulfils its purpose and the purpose of a human being is being an end in herself, this is not enough.⁵¹ Additionally, a virtuous character has to express itself in the outward appearance. So Kant argues for a kind of 'moral character'-expressionist theory of human beauty.⁵²

However, detached from a Kantian mind-set, one can wonder whether only signs of moral character traits positively influence our judgement about human beauty. Think, for example, of how Tolstoy describes the first encounter between Vronsky and Anna:

[...] but felt he must glance at her once more; not that she was very beautiful, not on account of the elegance and modest grace which were apparent in her whole figure, but because in the expression of her charming face, as she passed close by him, there was something peculiarly caressing and soft. As he looked round, she too turned her head. Her shining gray eyes, that looked dark from the thick lashes, rested with friendly attention on his face, as though she were recognizing him, and then promptly turned away to the passing crowd, as though seeking someone. In that brief look Vronsky had time to notice the suppressed eagerness which played over her face, and flitted between the brilliant eyes and the faint smile that curved her red lips. It was as though her nature were so brimming over with something that against her will it showed itself now in the flash of her eyes, and now in her smile. Deliberately she shrouded the light in her eyes, but it shone against her will in the faintly perceptible smile.⁵³

Although Anna is doubtlessly a physically attractive woman, not her physical beauty fascinates Vronsky and draws him towards her. Rather it is what Vronsky believes to see of her character: her friendliness, her attentiveness, her liveliness, her eagerness, and so on. These are not in a

⁴⁶ See Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, AA V 230.

⁴⁷ See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, AA V 229.

⁴⁸ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, AA V 233.

⁴⁹ See Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, AA V 234.

⁵⁰ See Menninghaus, *Das Versprechen der Schönheit*, 185.

⁵¹ See Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, AA V 227; 233.

⁵² See also Cooper, "Beautiful People, Beautiful Things," 248.

⁵³ Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, part I, chapter 18.

narrow sense moral character traits, but they are amiable, attractive character traits in the sense worked-out in section II. I assume—but I cannot argue for this thesis in detail in this paper—that also bodily and facial expressions of such character traits positively influence our judgements of beauty. If human beauty is closely connected with attractiveness, it makes sense that bodily and facial expressions of amiable character traits matter for human beauty. So, according to this ‘beautiful character’-expressionist view, a beautiful person is physically beautiful and shows signs of a beautiful character, more specific, she is highly physically attractive and displays visible signs of an amiable character.

To sum up, this paper has distinguished three different perspectives on human beauty: a body-centred, a dualist, and a character expressionist view. Depending on the context of utterance, a statement like “Person x is beautiful” can either mean that this person is physically attractive, or has a beautiful character, or both. But if one bears the inseparability-problem in mind, a character-expressionist interpretation is most likely to grasp the meaning of such an utterance. Furthermore, a character-expressionist proposal has the advantage that it can capture two seemingly contradictory intuitions, namely how human beauty can be only skin deep and can come from within.

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