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On the Interest in Beauty and Disinterest

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Beauty, like most philosophically gripping phenomena, has its fanatics. Claims for it (and against it) often seem overblown or grandiose, attributing to beauty a kind of mystical or religious import, or saying, with Plato, that contemplation of beauty is what ultimately makes life worth living.[1] G.E. Moore claims at the end of *Principia Ethica* that "…personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments include *all* the greatest, and *by far* the greatest, goods we can imagine…" and calls this "the ultimate and fundamental truth of Moral Philosophy."[2] Friedrich Schiller tells us, amazingly, "It is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom."[3] *Only* through beauty. Such claims are as strange to contemporary philosophical ears as they are common in the history of philosophy.[4]

It is tempting to ignore or dismiss such grand claims, or to react by pouring cold water on the theory of beauty. Extreme subjectivism in, or outright dismissal of, the theory of beauty can seem attractive not just because the experience of beauty can be so personal or give rise to so much disagreement, but also because it might seem too strange or implausible to give beauty the kind of weight that philosophers were once so eager to give it—as if only blanket dismissal could provide enough distance from such an awkward past. Necessity, truth, rationality, morality: they merit the enthusiastic attention they receive; beauty's fanatics, in contrast, are a little odd.

1. See Plato's *Symposium*; see also Alexander Nehamas's "'Only in the Contemplation of Beauty is Human Life Worth Living' Plato, *Symposium* 211d", in *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 1–18, April 2007.
2. *Principia Ethica*, Chapter 6, passage 113. Moore also calls beauty the "raison d'être of virtue", which forms, along with personal affections "…the rational ultimate end of human action and the sole criterion of social progress…".
3. "…if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom", *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, second letter, §5. See also the twenty-third letter.
4. Here are two other apparently similar remarks: Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* (6.421): "Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same." Nietzsche in the *The Birth of Tragedy*: "…only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* are existence and the world *justified* to eternity".

Unsurprisingly, then, grand claims for beauty are largely ignored or regarded with skepticism in contemporary philosophy — even in the Cinderella subfield of aesthetics, where, if beauty is discussed at all, many philosophers are eager to focus on a more "earthbound" notion.[5] In some cases, the thought that beauty is, or could be, profound in some way is explicitly set aside as parochial, idiosyncratic, or just too obscure. Near the beginning of Jerrold Levinson's recent account of visual beauty, for example, he writes,

> Before proceeding, though, I must briefly acknowledge another tradition of theorizing beauty, initiated by Plato, that makes of it a richer affair, or sets for it a higher standard. This is a tradition according to which beauty is not simply that which gives us pleasure to behold, but rather that which inspires us, ennobles us, summons us to transcendence….
>
> My view is that, although this is a power or an effect of some beautiful objects, of certain sorts, in some conditions of reception, it does not characterize all such objects or occasions of beholding.[6]

Levinson apparently offers this as a reason not to discuss this dimension of beauty. It doesn't come up again in his account, even though his thesis is that "beauty is not one". He proceeds to offer a careful taxonomy of species of visual beauty, including, among others, natural beauty, human beauty, formal beauty, and abstract beauty — all of which characterize "some beautiful objects, of certain sorts, in some conditions of reception", but not "all such objects or occasions of beholding". For all Levinson has said, there is another species of beauty — ennobling, or self-transcending, or inspiring beauty — that belongs in his taxonomy. Why shouldn't we expect a theory of beauty to explain how, sometimes, it "inspires us, ennobles us, summons us to transcendence", if it does?

The passage from Levinson suggests an answer. His thought is that the Platonic tradition "makes of" beauty a "richer affair". Some might think that sometimes beauty is "ennobling". But really, the thought is, beauty isn't very profound. Certain philosophers exaggerate it, inflate it, put icing on a lump of earth that might, in some conditions of reception, look like a cake. But whether this is right depends, at the very least, on whether we even understand *why* a philosopher would be tempted to construe beauty as Plato, Moore, and others have. And it is not clear whether the theory of beauty has achieved such understanding.

It is one thing to think that we shouldn't take such cases as our philosophical starting point, and quite another to think that we should ignore them altogether. One might reasonably think that the theory of beauty shouldn't begin with what might turn out to be exaggerated claims from beauty's PR department. But that reasonable view is compatible with there being a demand that beauty's apparent profundity, or the temptation to emphasize it, be either explained or explained away.

And the thing is, I'm kind of a fanatic. I'm easily dazzled by claims like Schiller's, Moore's, and Plato's and want to understand whether, and if so how, beauty might have the kind of significance philosophers have attributed to it. Maybe that reveals some failing or defect on my part, but a study of contemporary philosophical aesthetics does little to set me straight. The mainstream picture of aesthetic value and of the point of aesthetic life gives us almost no grip on how or even why beauty should have been thought to be so philosophically important.

The main problem seems to be what is arguably the most influential idea about beauty, namely, that it essentially involves a kind of affective response that philosophers call "disinterested pleasure". The idea is classically expressed in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; it had a major influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century

5. See Jerrold Levinson's "Beauty is Not One: The Irreducible Variety of Visual Beauty", in *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology*, eds. Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 190–207.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

aesthetic theory and art criticism; and it is still influential today. Levinson writes that a pleasure is aesthetic if it is

> …not rooted in or dependent on the way an art work answers to one's individual desires, needs, or worldly projects. Put positively, for pleasure to be aesthetic it must arise solely from contemplation of, attention to, or engagement with the object for its own sake, on the part of a sympathetic subject.[7]

This passage expresses the thought that aesthetic affect is impartial, in a sense, and it states both a negative and a positive condition, which we can express as follows:

> DISINTEREST- : If a pleasure in an item is aesthetic, then it is not due to the way the item satisfies one's desires, needs, or worldly projects.
>
> DISINTEREST+ : If a pleasure in an item is aesthetic, then it is due to sympathetic attention to, or contemplation of, the item for its own sake.

I have replaced Levinson's terms 'arises solely from', 'dependent upon', and 'rooted in' with 'due to'. This effectively replaces several ambiguous terms with one ambiguous term, which, like the others, is ambiguous between a causal notion and a normative notion. My interest is primarily in the normative notion, in the idea that a pleasure is aesthetic only if it is warranted or merited by "sympathetic attention to" the item and not by the way the item "answers to one's individual desires, needs, or worldly projects".[8] Both quoted phrases are intolerably vague, but the latter is especially so, given the focus of this essay. Their vagueness also speaks in favor of expressing *only* the necessary condition and not also the sufficient condition. For all their (lack of) specificity, there may be pleasures that satisfy them but that aren't aesthetic. I don't know whether the pleasing calm one may find in concentrating single-mindedly on an object or process (like the rise and fall of one's breath) is aesthetic, but it does satisfy a natural reading of the two phrases. Furthermore, note that DISINTEREST- and + leave open the types of objects that can merit this pleasure. For all they say, we can take aesthetic pleasure in objects of perception — looks, feels, sounds, etc. — and objects of pure contemplation or imagination — novels, poems, mathematical objects, and the like.

Both DISINTEREST- and + are expressed in a variety of works in aesthetics, new and old. In a famous statement of "aesthetic formalism", Clive Bell seems to endorse a strong form of the negative condition: "[T]o appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions."[9] According to Bell, artistic appreciation requires nothing "from life", so the pleasure it involves cannot be due to the satisfaction of our "desires, needs, or worldly projects". Bell is part of a tradition that considers art to be the paradigmatic object of aesthetic pleasure — so, on this view, aesthetic pleasure conforms to DISINTEREST-.

In a more recent work, *Functional Beauty*, Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson endorse the positive condition: "We think that the traditional notion of disinterestedness, when properly interpreted, is well founded and necessary for an acceptable analysis of the aesthetic" (104).[10]

7. "Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art", originally in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 295–306, October 1992, and reprinted in Levinson's *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, Cornell University Press, pp.15–6. There are many expressions of such a view in the literature. Sometimes the view is restricted to pleasure in *artworks*; sometimes artworks are treated more as paradigm cases of objects of aesthetic value; sometimes artworks are treated more as convenient examples of appropriate objects of aesthetic pleasure. Sometimes it is unclear whether the author is interested in aesthetic value or artistic value. I am treating it as a view in the theory of beauty, as Kant does, where beauty is aesthetic value *par excellence*.

8. I assume that the idea of a merited or warranted response is coherent, though it is outside the scope of this essay to go into detail about it. For some helpful discussion, see Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of Emotions", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 61, No. 1, pp. 65–90, July 2000.

9. See his book *Art*, Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 1914.

10. *Functional Beauty*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

And aesthetic pleasure, on their view, is "pleasure taken in perceptual appearance for its own sake…" (104–05).

The "traditional notion" is also well expressed by Kant, in whose work we find both conditions. Kant writes, "The satisfaction that determines the judgment of taste is without any interest", where 'interest' is defined as "the satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the existence of an object". Kant holds that when we feel an interested pleasure we represent an object's "existence" and relate it to our faculty of *desire*. In other words, we regard it in the light of our personal "desires, needs, or worldly projects". So if we feel a pleasure in response, then we feel an *interested* pleasure — interested because the pleasure purports to signal some fact about how the object can benefit us. Kant also writes that, in asking whether someone finds something beautiful, "One only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me…", thereby expressing the positive condition. He continues, "…however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation", thereby expressing the negative condition.[11]

Sometimes Kant seems to have in mind an even stronger principle. For example, in the same section, he writes, "Everyone must admit that a judgment about beauty in which there is mixed the least interest is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste." On one reading, this extends the disinterest criterion from a condition on interest in the *object* to any interest at all. And Levinson's statement of Disinterest+ might suggest that he agrees with this, particularly when he writes that aesthetic pleasure must arise *solely* from attention to the object "for its own sake". Such language suggests that the subject needn't do anything but dispassionately stare at the object, bringing nothing of herself to the table but awareness.

Yet Levinson warns against such strong versions of disinterest. According to Levinson, we should not think that disinterest rules out the idea that aesthetic pleasure depends in part on *some* interests or affective dispositions:

> There is a danger, no doubt, in taking [disinterest] too far. For certainly our satisfaction in an artwork, even when wholly focused on the object and its structure, causally presupposes *something* about our dispositions and affections and thus, in a sense, answers to *them*. Art moves human beings, after all, in part because of how humans are. But the point not to lose sight of is that where the psychological conditions required for an artwork to elicit a positive response are such as are *common to all persons*… then the satisfaction that such conditions underpin may still qualify as disinterested and thus aesthetic….[12]

Levinson posits a relation between aesthetic affect and shared "dispositions and affections". But it's not entirely clear what Levinson is saying about this relation, nor is it clear what he thinks supports this extra condition. He begins to state a sufficient condition: *if* certain "dispositions and affections" are shared by all, *then* the response they support is disinterested and therefore aesthetic. But he hedges in the consequent by stating that the pleasure such conditions underpin *may* still qualify as disinterested, which seems to convert the shared "dispositions and affections" into a necessary condition.

The sufficient condition is implausible, because we don't want to say that all shared pleasures are aesthetic. What about the necessary condition? Notice that Disinterest- and +, taken alone or together, *do not entail* the necessary condition Levinson states in the above passage. For all Disinterest- and + say, people may have differing warranted responses. Disinterest- and + are compatible with the possibility that aesthetic pleasure is merited by different objects for different people — that I may respond one way to something and you may respond differently, or perhaps not at all. In other words, for all

11. §2, Analytic of the Beautiful.

12. "Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art", p. 16, last emphasis added.

Disinterest- and + say, the features of persons that underlie their aesthetic responses might not be shared, and so there is a need to defend the view that shared "dispositions and affections" are necessary.

This raises the question as to whether, and if so how, aesthetic affect can (1) be due to sympathetic attention to an item, and (2) not be due to the way the item satisfies our "desires, needs, or worldly projects", yet also (3) answer to features of our sensibility that are personal, idiosyncratic, or otherwise less than universal or shared. Call this *the disinterest question*. To answer this question in the *positive*, we would have to show that aesthetic affect can indeed satisfy Disinterest- and + while nonetheless being due to features of sensibility that are less than universal. To answer this question in the *negative*, we would have to show that whenever Disinterest- and + are satisfied, the pleasure is due to shared features of sensibility.

My aim in what follows is to show that consideration of the disinterest question serves to undermine the emphasis on disinterest in the theory of beauty, in a way that helps to illuminate beauty's significance. I adopt two strategies to meet this aim. The first is to argue that a negative answer to this question is implausible, and that a positive answer counts against using the notion of disinterest in the theory of beauty. A second strategy is to show that even if beauty *does* require a sensibility that is "common to all persons" — that is, even if the first strategy fails and a negative answer to the disinterest question is correct — the emphasis on disinterest is at best misleading, at worst misguided. In other words, I want to argue that the requirement of shared "dispositions and affections" is not enough to merit, or even to motivate, the thought that beauty's affective character should be described as "disinterested". My focus in pursuing both strategies is the way in which beauty can have a kind of life- or self-transforming import.

Both strategies are promising — and I will explain why I think so shortly — but it is worth highlighting how far they are from the lines of thought pursued these days. For many philosophers today, the emphasis on disinterested *pleasure* is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. This is because, they argue, pleasure is too narrow a notion to capture the intrinsically rewarding but not necessarily pleasing experiences we have of certain valuable works of art. The experience of some works of art may involve *enjoyment* of a capacity to challenge, disturb, provoke, or excite in a way that is not accurately characterized as "pleasing". Such works provoke and sustain our positive interest without necessarily giving us *pleasure*. I might "enjoy" Picasso's *Guernica*, Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit", or Hitchcock's *Vertigo* while not finding my experience of these works particularly pleasing. Thus the focus on pleasure shifts to an even more expansive notion of enjoyment.[13]

This has the effect of infusing the notion of disinterest in a cloudy soup of "the aesthetic", in which philosophers now include pretty much any reaction we have to anything, so long as we are attending to its form, appearance, or design.[14] This extremely broad notion of "the aesthetic" places little or no priority on beauty in particular and effectively realizes J.L. Austin's mid-century wish that we could "forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy".[15] Instead of going on and on about beauty, philosophers have focused on "the dainty" and "the dumpy" — that is, on the vast range of terms we use to discuss and evaluate artworks and items of "taste".

This all-inclusive, paradigmatically art-centered approach to aesthetics has given us a much broader and more nuanced understanding of the variety of aesthetic and artistic value and the relation between these values.[16] But one of its effects has been a willful neglect of beauty

13. Discussion of this point can be found in Jerrold Levinson's "Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art" and in Malcolm Budd's "Aesthetic Essence," in *Aesthetic Essays*, Oxford University Press, p. 45–6.

14. Here, for example, is Yuriko Saito's definition in *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, 2007: "In the realm of 'the aesthetic', I am including any reactions we form toward the sensuous and/or design qualities of any object, phenomenon, or activity" (p. 9).

15. J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses", in *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 131.

16. For recent discussion, see Dominic McIver Lopes's "The Myth of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value", in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 244, pp. 518–36, 2011. See also two responses: Andrew Huddleston, "In Defense of Artistic Value", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 249, pp. 705–14, 2012,

in particular, as though it were just another one of the aesthetic properties captured by the inclusive theories — at best the object of disinterested pleasure, a happy modification of "enjoyment", or a vague or archaic way of talking about thin aesthetic or artistic value.[17]

But it is difficult to see how the mainstream approach to thinking about aesthetic affect could explain how beauty in particular could be so significant, or could have played such a major role in the thinking of past philosophers. Why think that mere enjoyment, or disinterested pleasure, could have a kind of spiritual or religious import, be what ultimately makes life worth living, or that experiencing such pleasure could be the only path to freedom? (I'm assuming we aren't zealous hedonists here.) Even if enjoyment of a sort should figure in a very general account of the aesthetic, what is it about beauty in particular that might lead one to place it at such heights?

The temptation to do so is strong — so strong that its effects are present even within the tradition of emphasizing disinterested pleasure. Disinterest is not promoted *only* by those who want to focus on "earthbound" notions of beauty, or who otherwise want to take the wind out of beauty's sails. Some philosophers have used the notion of disinterested pleasure to try to capture the thought that the experience of beauty involves self-transcendence, purity of vision, or, even more mysteriously, experience that somehow cannot be understood in the normal terms of subject and object.

Schopenhauer, for example, takes Disinterest- to new heights when he writes that "…aesthetic pleasure in the beautiful consists, to a large extent, in the fact that, when we enter the state of pure contemplation, we are raised for the moment above all willing, above all desires and cares; we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves".[18] If a philosopher's main resource in the theory of beauty is the concept of disinterest, then "selflessness" is a promising way to explain beauty's significance. If we think of the self as partly constituted by (at least some of) our desires, then our sense of self will be responsive to our sense of desire. Schopenhauer suggests that the self just is the will, so if "pure contemplation" strips away our desires, or somehow places us "above" them, then we will be left with no sense of self, or even a sense of selflessness. He sounds a similar thought when he echoes and amplifies Disinterest+:

> Perhaps the reason why common objects in *still life* seem so transfigured and generally everything *painted* appears in a supernatural light is that we then no longer look at things in the flux of time and in the connection of cause and effect…. On the contrary, we are snatched out of that eternal flux of all things and removed into a dead and silent eternity. In its individuality the thing itself was determined by time and by the conditions of the understanding; here we see this connection abolished and only the *Platonic Idea* is left.[19]

This suggests that there really is something extraordinary about beauty that a theory needs to capture, that the affective notion that features in the theory, whatever it is, must be able to explain, illuminate, or somehow speak to beauty's apparent profundity, however that is characterized.

Of course, few philosophers today would be inclined to join Schopenhauer in using terms like 'supernatural' or 'Platonic Idea' to characterize beauty's significance. I don't know whether, or even what it means to say that, beauty is the only way to freedom, or that contemplation of beauty is ultimately what makes life worth living. A decisive claim against any attempt to make sense of such views would be that no one really connects with the thought that, or understands how,

and Louise Hanson, "The Reality of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 252, pp. 492–508, July 2013.

17. This isn't to say that no one talks about beauty, or that this attitude toward beauty is entirely unjustifiable. The past emphasis on beauty in art theory, production, and criticism had a pernicious influence and was worth resisting.

18. *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I, §68.

19. *Manuscript Remains*, Vol. I, §80.

beauty might have a profound dimension. Perhaps enjoyment is all there really is. Perhaps Levinson is right that beauty is not as rich or profound as some philosophers have made it out to be, and this is a fact that, in one way or another, we all acknowledge.

But I think this isn't correct, and the considerations against it support, in turn, both strategies for resisting the emphasis on disinterest in the theory of beauty. Although beauty may not have delivered on its religious, spiritual, or even mystical promise, I think we still understand and connect with at least one way in which it has a kind of strong personal import. And if this is mischaracterized or cannot be captured by the running views, then there is some real work to do in the theory of beauty, the least of which is an overhaul of its central notion.

Twentieth-century literature contains a wealth of examples where the encounter with beauty is deeply meaningful. And in contrast to the tradition of emphasizing disinterested pleasure, the self seems to be rather *involved* in these experiences, not diminished, obscured, or excluded — indeed, the self seems essentially to be clarified, illuminated, transformed. There are two ways in which this seems to occur, and both are under-explored in aesthetics. In some cases, the experience seems to bear on an important aspect of the subject's individual sense of self, in a way that supports the first strategy articulated above (according to which aesthetic affect can indeed satisfy DISINTEREST- and + but be due to less-than-universal features of a person). In other cases, the experience seems to bear on a broader evaluative sense of the subject's life in a way that supports both the first and the second strategy.

Consider the following passage from John Williams's novel *Stoner* (1965), which tells the quiet story of William Stoner, a simple man and mediocre English professor. Under pressure from his wife, who barely tolerates him, he buys a house he can barely afford. He needs a study, so he decides to make a downstairs room his own.

> As he worked on the room, and as it began slowly to take a shape, he realized that for many years, unknown to himself, he had had an image locked somewhere within him like a shamed secret, an image that was ostensibly of a place, but which was actually of himself. So it was himself that he was attempting to define as he worked on his study. As he sanded the old boards for his bookcases, and saw the surface roughness disappear, the gray weathering flake away to the essential wood and finally to a rich purity of grain and texture — as he repaired his furniture and arranged it in the room, it was himself that he was slowly shaping, it was himself that he was putting into a kind of order, it was himself that he was making possible. (p. 100–01)

Williams seems to draw a connection between attending to the way something looks or appears and "self-definition" or "making oneself possible". By attending to the look of the study as he arranges it, Stoner seems to identify with a certain conception of himself — an "image" somehow reflected in the emerging study, in the "rich purity of grain and texture" of the wooden bookcases. This self-conception is "ostensibly of a place" but "actually of himself" — it is something for Stoner to achieve or embody. It is a self-conception that represents a kind of person Stoner wishes to be or knows he can be, but currently isn't — it's a "place" to go, but Stoner isn't yet there. It is a kind of "ideal self" or positive self-conception that was locked within him "like a shamed secret", and somehow reflected in the character of the study.

Stoner is attending to the arrangement of furniture and its "rich purity of grain and texture". Richness and purity are paradigmatic beauties — often featuring in our thought and talk about beauty — and attending to the way a room looks or feels is a characteristically aesthetic activity. Stoner's contemplation of the aesthetic character of the room connects him with a way of understanding and valuing himself, one that can play a guiding role in how he lives and understands his life.

Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* contains an arguably similar illustration wherein finding something beautiful involves an awareness

of self-or life-shaping values.[20] Bathilde Amédée, the grandmother of the narrator (for convenience I'll call him "Marcel"), loves the beauty of the church steeple in Combray for its "naturalness" and "distinction" — values she "prizes above anything else in the world":

> Without quite knowing why, my grandmother found in the steeple of Saint-Hilaire that absence of vulgarity, pretension, and meanness which made her love — and deem rich in beneficent influences — nature itself…. And certainly every part one saw of the church served to distinguish the whole from any other building by a kind of general feeling which pervaded it, but it was in the steeple that the church seemed to display a consciousness of itself, to affirm its individual and responsible existence….
>
> I think, too, that in a confused way my grandmother found in the steeple of Combray what she prized above anything else in the world, namely, a natural air and an air of distinction. Ignorant of architecture, she would say: "My dears, laugh at me if you like; it is not conventionally beautiful, but there is something in its quaint old face which pleases me. If it could play the piano, I am sure it would really play."[21] And when she gazed on it, when her eyes followed the gentle tension, the fervent inclination of its stony slopes which drew together as they rose, like hands joined in prayer, she would absorb herself so utterly in the outpouring of the spire that her gaze seemed to leap upwards with it; her lips at the same time curving in a friendly smile for the worn old stones of which the setting sun now illumined no more than the topmost pinnacles, which, at the point where they entered that zone of sunlight and were softened and sweetened by it, seemed to have mounted suddenly far higher, to have become truly remote, like a song whose singer breaks into falsetto, an octave above the accompanying air.[22]

20. I use a few examples from Proust, whose novel *In Search of Lost Time* is full of fascinating and subtle descriptions of the encounter with beauty. I agree with Richard Moran's suggestion that "it should be beyond question that Marcel Proust is at least as decisive a thinker about the nature of beauty as is Immanuel Kant". See his "Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 303–04, Winter 2012. All citations of *In Search of Lost Time* are from Volume 1: *Swann's Way* of C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin's translation of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Random House, 1981.

21. "Je suis sure que s'il jouait du piano, il ne jouerait pas *sec*."

In her understated way, Bathilde tries to explain the beauty she finds in the steeple. It embodies "naturalness" and "distinction", which are values she prizes above anything else in the world. And they aren't just values she appreciates in other people; Proust makes it clear that they are values she loves and seeks out in herself.[23] It is apparently in virtue of her finding *these* values reflected in the steeples that she finds the steeple beautiful. This suggests a close connection between Marcel's grandmother and William Stoner: perhaps Stoner finds values he could recognize as his and "prize above anything else in the world", thereby "defining" the kind of person he shall be.

Proust has another illustration of the way in which beauty can have a profound effect on us, but in this case the effect seems to bear more generally on the subject's evaluative sense of his life. In *Swann's Way* we learn of Charles Swann, a busy if somewhat listless Parisian socialite. One day at a party, he hears a beautiful phrase from a sonata by the (fictional) composer Vinteuil and is struck with the feeling that he must change:

> But now, like a confirmed invalid in whom, all of a sudden, a change of air and surroundings, or a new course of treatment, or sometimes an organic change in himself, spontaneous and unaccountable, seems to have brought about such an improvement in his health that he begins

22. *Swann's Way*, p. 69.

23. Among other descriptions, Proust writes of Bathilde's "nobility of character" (p. 23), "ardent idealism" (p. 41), and "generosity and moral distinction" (p. 45).

> to envisage the possibility, hitherto beyond all hope, of starting to lead belatedly a wholly different life, Swann found in himself, in the memory of the phrase that he had heard, in certain other sonatas which he had made people play to him to see whether he might not perhaps discover his phrase therein, the presence of one of those invisible realities in which he had ceased to believe and to which, as though the music had had upon the moral barrenness from which he was suffering a sort of recreative influence, he was conscious once again of the desire and almost the strength to consecrate his life.[24]

Before hearing the music, Swann is acting on his usual preferences and values, but his experience of the music alters these values and gives Swann a new perspective on what matters to him. Swann finds in it an "invisible reality" whose "recreative influence" gives him the desire to "consecrate his life". In the *Stoner* passage, attention to the character of the room is associated with being a wholly different *person*, or at least with finally defining the kind of person he is or aspires to be; in the passage about Swann, aesthetic experience is associated with living a wholly different *life*.

A similar experience is arguably captured by Rainer Maria Rilke's famous poem about an experience of an ancient bust of Apollo:

> *Apollo's Archaic Torso*[25]
>
> We can't know his unheard-of head,
> with eyes like ripening apples. Though
> like so many flames his torso glows,
> with a glare that, held back instead,
>
> abides and shines. Else his chest's bow
> couldn't blind you, nor could such a slight
> turn of his waist send smiles of light
> through the site of creation's growth.
>
> Otherwise this stone would be scarred and small
> under the shoulders' diaphanous fall
> and not shimmer like the coat of a beast;
>
> nor burst forth from all his boundaries light
> like a star: there's not a place in the least
> that does not see you. You must change your life.

The poem describes a rich experience of a sculpture, a description infused with the metaphor of light — the torso "shines", "glows", "blinds", emanates light "like a star", and "shimmers".[26] And if it were somehow different, it wouldn't captivate: it would be "small", "diaphanous", "scarred". Yet the final lines mark a jarring shift in address, from a description of the sculpture's radiance to its apparent acknowledgement of the viewer. And it is this acknowledgement that carries a profound message: *Change your life*. It seems that Rilke's implied subject is somehow presented, like Swann, with the thought of a "wholly different life" — a life somehow reflected in or evoked by the sculpture's radiance.

The first two examples suggest that aesthetic experience can bear on — highlight, define, transform — our sense of self, whereas the last two examples suggest that it can bear on our evaluative sense of our lives, in such a way that our life may seem clearer, more valuable, precious, or worth cherishing or changing. Sometimes both seem to occur. While riding in the back of a carriage, young Marcel spots three trees in the distance (the "trees at Hudimesnil"). This occasions an experience in which he feels a remarkable pleasure, the understanding of

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 229–30.

25. This is my translation of the German "Archaischer Torso Apollos". It differs from the other English translations that I'm aware of in its attempt to capture some of Rilke's meter and rhyme. For a different interpretation, see Stephen Mitchell's translation in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Vintage, 1989.

26. "glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber", "hält und glänzt", "der Brust dich blenden", "flimmerte", "Rändern noch wie ein Stern".

which he thinks could help him live a "true life". In looking at the trees in the distance, he

> …recognized that kind of pleasure which requires, it is true, a certain effort on the part of the mind, but in comparison with which the attractions of the indolence which inclines us to renounce that pleasure seem very slight. That pleasure, the object of which I could only dimly feel, which I must create for myself, I experienced only on rare occasions, but on each of these it seemed to me that the things that had happened in the meantime were of little importance, and that in attaching myself to the reality of that pleasure alone could I at length begin to lead a true life. (771)

This is remarkably similar to Swann's experience of the Vinteuil sonata and to Rilke's poem about the sculpture. But shortly thereafter, Marcel describes his experience as potentially providing a kind of self-understanding. Proust describes the trees as "telling" Marcel something, as seeming to say to him:

> What you fail to learn from us today, you will never know. If you allow us to drop back into the hollow of this road from which we sought to raise ourselves up to you, a whole part of yourself which we were bringing to you will vanish into thin air. (773)

The trees present Marcel with "a whole part of [him]self", the understanding of which would help him "begin to lead a true life". He loses sight of the trees before he has fully grasped what part of himself that is, and feels, as a result, "as wretched as if [he] had just lost a friend, had died to [him]self…" (773).

Each passage seems to involve a kind of self- or life-conception connected to the subject's attention to the way something looks, sounds, or appears. The subjects seem to glimpse some aspect of themselves in the objects of their experience — an aspect that they seem to identify with while recognizing that it does not capture the kind of person they currently are or the kind of life they currently live. They don't really live up to a way they have of thinking about who they are or what matters in their lives. In grasping the self- or life-image, they seem to construe themselves as beautiful or worthy or good — or at least potentially so. In his short story "Pieces of Glass", John Gould describes a similar experience, directed at a painting. His character is drawn to a painting he encounters at a gallery opening and then, upon meeting the artist who painted it, drawn to her. He buys the painting that night but never sees the artist again.

> I haven't seen her since that night, my artist, but I have the painting now to stare at, when I'm alone, this strange painting, this oddly shaped shard of glass that takes all my staring and turns it around, somehow, reflects it, gives it back to me, almost as though it were me, as though I were the beautiful one.[27]

Of course, these are *literary* depictions, which is to acknowledge that they occur in largely fictional works. But the important point is that they ring true. They speak to our sense that beauty puts us in touch with not just something extraordinary in the world, but something extraordinary in ourselves.

The analogous thought about morality is familiar enough. Philosophers have held, and many continue to hold, that moral reflection and action put us in touch with our "true", "highest", or most estimable selves, and this is often associated with aesthetic experience. Kant famously speaks of "the moral law within" in terms that are evocative of the sublime. But as we have seen, aesthetics is less enthusiastic about the thought that the experience of beauty involves self-transformation, enhancement, or elevation. And to the extent that theories of beauty

27. John Gould, *The Kingdom of Heaven: Eighty-Eight Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*, Ekstasis Editions, 1996, p. 13.

have tried to articulate it, as we have seen, it has more often been by claiming that beauty is incompatible with or effaces our self-awareness. Yet these passages suggest quite the opposite.

Of course, philosophers *have* taken an interest in a certain way in which aesthetic phenomena, broadly speaking, can engage or affect our sense of self, particularly through our use of narrative in constructing a self- or life-conception, and through our identification with characters or events depicted in narrative artworks, *e.g.*, novels, poems, films, and narrative paintings.[28] We often imaginatively adopt different perspectives when we engage with fictional narratives, empathize with a friend, or immerse ourselves in an actor's role, and doing so can give us a new perspective on our lives and ourselves.

But our literary examples don't fit this model, precisely because they are so narratively sparse. Stoner is arranging a room and appreciating the "rich purity of grain and texture" of the bookshelves; Marcel is looking at trees in the distance; Swann is listening to a snippet of absolute music. The closest we get to narrative content is the sculpture (Rilke) and the artwork (Gould). But Rilke's severely damaged ancient bust is an object of metaphorical regard, and Gould's artwork — described as a "shard of glass" — is, for all we can tell, an abstract piece. It seems that the subjects are sympathetically attending to the way something looks, sounds, or appears.

In other words, it seems that Disinterest+ is satisfied in these encounters. But we want to say that they aren't *simply* contemplating the way something looks. These encounters seem to involve access to a way of understanding and valuing oneself or one's life. We might say that the subjects see themselves or their lives *as beautiful* in the beauty of a scene, sound, sculpture, or painting. Their experience of beauty seems to be inseparable from an awareness of their own value, where the kind of value they see themselves as having is closely connected to the kind of value they are experiencing the world as having. Beauty seems to introduce them to a state of valuing that is as directed at themselves or their lives as it is at the world.

So what exactly is the way we have of valuing ourselves or our lives that beauty can connect us to? What aspect of ourselves or our lives can be "reflected in" or "hinted at" by beauty? What is beauty such that something recognizable as "self" can feature in it?

Disinterest theories have resources to provide answers to these difficult questions, but the answers they can give seem incapable of fully capturing the phenomena. There are two general approaches a disinterest theorist might take. One is to argue that self-awareness — especially of the sort that might result in a transformative sense of self- or life-worth — is a *consequence* of the experience of beauty vis-à-vis disinterested pleasure. Another is to agree that disinterested pleasure somehow involves the self, but only a self that we all share — a universal, rational, or moral self.

Our discussion of Schopenhauer supplies an example of the first response, which tries to squeeze beauty's significance out of disinterested pleasure. In finding something beautiful and feeling disinterested pleasure, we become aware of a source of value beyond ourselves and our individual interests. Disinterested pleasure informs us of the existence of something we need to conform ourselves to in some way, perhaps by admiring or respecting its object, and so can play a role in getting us to see ourselves or our lives in a different way, particularly as guided or shaped by values outside of ourselves. The full-blooded moral insight is that other people are such values. In this way, disinterested pleasure is a kind of proto-moral feeling.

Appealing as the thought may be, it seems inadequate to capture the complexities of the phenomena depicted in our literary examples. The "ideal self" that William Stoner's experience involves seems *personal* and *contentful* — it is not a general conception of a kind of being that has a certain moral capacity. It is an individual or personal, if somewhat vague, conception of a particular kind of person Stoner

28. The role of self-narrative in moral psychology and ethics has been the topic of much recent work. See, for example, Marya Schechtman's *The Constitution of Selves, Cornell University Press, 1996, and her more recent Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of a Life,* Oxford University Press, 2014; see also Peter Goldie's *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

aspires to be. Proust seems keenly aware of this: when young Marcel sees the trees at Hudimesnil, he regards the pleasure he feels as bringing to him "a whole part of [him]self" the grasp of which would enable him to lead a "true life". But the pleasure is part of, or a response to, an awareness or recognition whose content is too vague or unclear for him to fully grasp. It is not plausible that the content is simply that he has the capacity for moral reflection — a capacity that Swann and Marcel are already aware of having. Furthermore, consider Swann, who finds in himself (and in "his" music) a desire to "consecrate" his life. As the novel makes clear, this does not mean he wants to make his life more moral or rational — he wants to pursue his intellectual and artistic ideals.[29]

Another problem concerns connecting this thought, if we ultimately should, with the thought that beauty's significance includes finding ourselves beautiful, or at least with seeing ourselves as having a kind of aesthetic value. The disinterest theorist's first response says that the value we find in ourselves is a kind of capacity to see beyond ourselves, a capacity to value the world independently of whether it satisfies our individual desires and interests. As important as this capacity is, it is not clear why we would regard such a capacity as having aesthetic value akin to beauty. But if the sense of self is, as I've suggested, something like an ideal, then we can see more clearly why we might associate it with beauty, for ideals can be the product of our own creative activity. They can be original, unique, intriguing, and exciting in ways that artworks can be, and we can regard them as structuring and giving value — even aesthetic value — to a life.[30]

The literary examples suggest that self-awareness of some sort is partly constitutive of the affective state in the experience of beauty, not simply a downstream effect. Thus, the second response a disinterest theorist might adopt is to argue that self-awareness of a sort is indeed constitutive of the experience of beauty, but the self we are aware of is one we all share. For example, consider a theory that states that beauty is a kind of order or harmony. (It's hardly worth mentioning that such a theory is hopeless, but for our purposes the particulars don't matter.) By reflecting order or harmony, beauty puts us in mind of our highest, rational selves. Beauty, then, reflects an ideal we all share (or should all have). The pleasure we feel as a result is indeed responsive to our desire, and this desire is indeed partly constitutive of our sense of self, but it's *impersonal* in the relevant sense — it isn't an idiosyncratic or individualizing desire. It's one that we all (should) have and all (should) find compelling, and so it is one that figures among the permitted "dispositions and affections" that supposedly underlie aesthetic affect.[31]

We could refine and generalize the view in various ways, but the problem a disinterest theorist faces is that it plays into the hand of our two strategies against disinterest. Consider the second strategy, which was to argue that, on its own, the requirement of a common or

29. The passage that immediately precedes the one I quoted illustrates this: "Indeed this passion for a phrase of music seemed, for a time, to open up before Swann the possibility of a sort of rejuvenation. He had so long ceased to direct his life towards any ideal goal, confining himself to the pursuit of ephemeral satisfactions, that he had come to believe, without ever admitting it to himself in so many words, that he would remain in that condition for the rest of his days. More than this, since his mind no longer entertained any lofty ideas, he had ceased to believe in (although he could not have expressly denied) their reality. Thus he had grown into the habit of taking refuge in trivial considerations, which enabled him to disregard matters of fundamental importance. Just as he never stopped to ask himself whether he would not have done better by not going into society, but on the other hand knew for certain that if he had accepted an invitation he must put in an appearance, and that afterwards, if he did not actually call, he must at least leave cards upon his hostess, so in his conversation he took care never to express with any warmth a personal opinion about anything, but instead would supply facts and details which were valid enough in themselves and excused him from showing his real capacities. He would be extremely precise about the recipe for a dish, the dates of a painter's birth and death, and the titles of his works. Sometimes, in spite of himself, he would let himself go so far as to express an opinion on a work of art, or on someone's interpretation of life, but then he would cloak his words in a tone of irony, as though he did not altogether associate himself with what he was saying." (*Swann's Way*, p. 229)

30. In my paper "Ideals as Metaphors" (in progress), I develop a theory of personal ideals according to which ideal self-conceptions are metaphorical self-conceptions. I contrast this view with the idea that they are fictional self-conceptions.

31. Perhaps St. Augustine had a view like this.

universal sensibility is not enough to merit, or even to motivate, the thought that beauty's affective character should be described as "disinterested". Once we allow a constitutive connection between beauty's affect and a sense of self, however universal, it seems misleading at best to describe the affect as "disinterested". Such a view holds that our experience of beauty consists in, or at least is essentially poised to issue, a valuing state that is as much about the life or self of the subject as it is about the world — one that is potentially self- or life-transforming. The challenge is to understand what this valuing state is, and if we begin by describing beauty's affective character as disinterested, then it is easy to see how we might veer off track, or end up calibrating our theories so as to be insensitive to any thought of beauty's significance. (Furthermore, at the core of our theory would be the awkward claim that the affective character of the experience of beauty is self-interested but disinterested.)

Now consider the first strategy, which was to argue that aesthetic affect may satisfy Disinterest- and + while not satisfying the extra requirement that it be grounded in shared "dispositions and affections". If the experience of beauty involves a sense of self or life that we regard as valuable, ideal, or otherwise worth embodying or living, then why restrict the relevant sense of self or life to that which is universal? Why not allow for a plurality of ideals, some of which are shared, some of which are not? Marcel's grandmother sees "naturalness" and "distinction" in the steeple. What seems to warrant her response is in part the fact that *she* prizes these above anything else in the world, at least when it comes to the way she lives her life. She allows that others may not value them as she does and so may not find the steeples beautiful as she does. Stoner seems similarly responsive to personal, or less-than-universal, ideals reflected in his study. He seems responsive to the way in which his emerging study reflects the serene and austere life of a certain kind of professor. It seems that what is doing much of the affective work in these cases is the relation the subject has to what she finds reflected in the world; she sees herself in the beautiful object by seeing her ideals reflected there. This suggests that what matters is beauty's reflecting such *personal values* or *ideals* — some, like "order" (or "order-as-it-reflects-rationality") may be universal; others may be less than universal.

Some might be tempted to argue that our interest in more personal or non-universal ideals is among the "desires, needs, or worldly projects" ruled out by Disinterest-. But that is precisely what our literary examples count against. Once we admit a certain kind of desire as partly constitutive of beauty's affect, what justifies restricting the desire to those we all share, particularly in the face of the examples from Proust, Williams, and Rilke (among others)? It is common ground in the theory of beauty that our affective response cannot be a response solely to the object's particular instrumental value or to how the subject will benefit from using it. Our literary examples show that the burden of proof is on those who want to strengthen the restriction on "interest" to exclude things like our deeply personal interest in certain values, ideals, or ways of life that we may find reflected in a scene, person, or thing. And if no one is really willing to meet that burden, or if their attempts to meet it fall flat, then on a reasonable understanding of its central terms, Disinterest- is also satisfied by our examples.

If that's right, then we have arrived at a positive answer to the disinterest question, namely, whether aesthetic affect can be (1) due to sympathetic attention to the item for its own sake, (2) not due to the way the item satisfies our "desires, needs, or worldly projects", yet also (3) due to "dispositions and affections" that are less than universal. This shows that the requirement of shared "dispositions and affections" is not entailed by Disinterest- or +. And if that's right, then it will be exceedingly difficult to understand why philosophers should care about the concept of disinterest in the theory of beauty, apart from its considerable historical significance.

The natural alternative is to focus instead on the special kind of desire or interest beauty elicits and engages — an interest or desire that is attuned to both the world and the person living in the world. The discussion suggests that concepts like "self-definition", "living a true life" or "ideal-self" would do better, if only as reminders of where to

set our sights in developing a theory of beauty, than "self-dissolution", "universal self", or "disinterest".

Perhaps we are misled at the very first step, when we begin by thinking of the paradigm of aesthetic affect as a kind of pleasure. Pleasure alone, or even the desire for it, does not help to carve out an especially interesting or substantial self. And those pleasures that do are often symptoms or expressions of a more substantial self-constituting or self-defining desire or commitment. Perhaps we would do better to think of aesthetic affect as a kind of emotion — a state that, like most pleasures, is affective and intentional, but, unlike pleasure, contains a complex evaluative representation, one that is sensitive to the individual whose emotion it is.

Understanding this emotion requires much more work, but it will help to get clearer on its representational content. I think Proust can continue to guide us, but perhaps surprisingly, I also think Kant — the towering advocate of disinterest — can be a guide and can help us appreciate the role that a concept like "disinterest" plays in a theory of beauty. Without going into too much detail here: Kant held that beauty is the expression or presentation of "aesthetic ideas". An aesthetic idea is "a representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking, though without it being possible for any determinate thought, *i.e.*, concept, to be adequate to it" (§49, 314). Aesthetic ideas are sensible counterparts of "rational ideas", or ideas that have no adequate intuition. Some of Kant's examples of rational ideas are God, freedom, love, and death, but he would presumably include ideals of various sorts, at least insofar as an ideal is something that cannot be fully realized, and so cannot be the object of an intuition. Furthermore, Kant writes that "…taste is at bottom a faculty for the judging of the sensible rendering of moral ideas…" (5:356), which suggests that moral ideas are the most (if not the only) aesthetically relevant rational ideas. If we think of a moral idea as, roughly, a rational idea about how to live one's life, then moral ideas are much like personal ideals.

It would seem, then, that the view of beauty I am suggesting here — roughly, beauty as the expression of personal ideals — has a strong affinity with core features of Kant's aesthetics. But this doesn't mean we should follow Kant in his use of 'disinterest'. Kant describes as "disinterested" the feeling we get upon finding an aesthetic idea expressed in art or nature. But, at least on one way of thinking about it, this primarily serves to emphasize that pure aesthetic pleasure is not a simple pleasure but is rationally grounded, in part in the "ideas" we find reflected in aesthetic experience and in our capacity to find them there. It's more important, and less misleading, to emphasize the rational grounds of a certain kind of aesthetic emotion — grounds we can partly locate in its representational content.[32]

The general thought that beauty is the object of an emotion has a long history in the particular view that "love" of a sort, not pleasure, should be the central affective notion in the theory of beauty. The thought is almost as old as philosophy itself (and lyric poetry) but could still be explored and developed further.[33] If the considerations raised here are right, then doing so promises to give us a clearer view of the kind of value beauty is and may even illuminate an important and under-appreciated way in which aesthetic value interacts with a kind of ethical value. That would be a pretty satisfying result, at least for this fanatic.[34]

32. Thanks to the anonymous referee who encouraged me to include a note about Kant and aesthetic ideas.

33. I begin to take up this project in my forthcoming paper "Aesthetic Love", in *Art & Philosophy: New Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Christy Mag Uidhir, Oxford University Press. For a healthy dose of the tradition, see Plato's *Symposium*; Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry*; Mary Mothersill's *Beauty Restored*, Adams, Banister, and Cox, 1984 (especially chapter 9); Alexander Nehamas's *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, Princeton University Press, 2007; and Richard Moran's "Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty". I briefly discuss this tradition in an encyclopedia entry entitled "Beauty and Love", in Oxford's *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, 2014.

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