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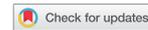
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## Engineering Human Beauty

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### ABSTRACT

Individual differences in bodily beauty result in significant differences in life outcomes. Some such differences seem unwarranted. On this basis, various authors have argued that there is a kind of discrimination—lookism—that affects those who are aesthetically disadvantaged. Several strategies have been proposed to address lookism. One aim of this paper is to draw a distinction between two sorts of anti-lookist strategies. *Redistributive* approaches propose to alter the current distribution of beauty, either by broadening beauty standards, or by giving individuals more options to improve their appearance. *Revisionary* approaches argue that we should drop our current conception of human beauty in favour of one that is more compatible with social justice goals. Another aim of the paper is to argue that two problems posed by revisionary strategies represent a *prima facie* reason to prefer redistributive ones. Both problems are rooted in a trade-off between value and justice that is characteristic of revisionary approaches.

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### 1. Introduction

This article discusses discrimination that favours beautiful people over aesthetically disadvantaged ones. The idea that beauty standards are complicit in oppression mechanisms is not new, especially in feminist scholarship [Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993; Wolf 2002]. However, recent contributions have pointed out how looks are in themselves a source of unfair disadvantage. That is, regardless of how it might intersect importantly with other forms of discrimination, discrimination on the basis of one's appearance deserves separate consideration. Alongside sexism, racism, and ableism, there is *lookism*.<sup>1</sup>

A first aim of this article is to argue that the existing attempts to address lookism are usefully divided into two broad categories—*redistributive* strategies, and *revisionary* ones. Redistributive strategies favour a redistribution of beauty through changes in beauty standards, or by giving people more options to improve their appearance. Revisionary strategies argue that fighting lookism requires a different conception of what human beauty is. A second aim of the paper is to argue that revisionary approaches, at least on their most natural interpretation, are inferior to redistributive ones,

<sup>1</sup> Minerva [2017] offers perhaps the clearest and most concise formulation of the general problem.

because they involve an undesirable and unnecessary compromise between value and justice.

## 2. Three Features of Human Beauty

I start with three features that I take to be central to the notion of human beauty as it is found across human societies. The one that I describe here is not the only way in which we relate to people's bodies and embodied subjectivity. But I suspect that almost everyone would recognize, in the description that follows, three central features of a practice with which they are familiar.

First, the concept of beauty is an *aesthetic* one. Human beauty requires and primarily involves the assessment of one's sensory appearance. I do not deny that it is possible for non-sensory features of a person to affect their beauty,<sup>2</sup> but I think that it is uncontroversial that our standard beauty judgments are centrally concerned with a person's appearance.

Second, beauty is *comparative*, in that it is possible to rank people according to their beauty, and to judge one to be more or less beautiful than another. Intersubjective agreement about such rankings is not complete, but neither is it so in the case of artworks. In both cases, near-unanimity may be reached when the distinctions involved are not too fine-grained. I suspect that people would agree that US President Joe Biden is not as good looking as George Clooney but is better looking than Rudy Giuliani. The standards that determine what counts as beautiful vary across cultures, although it is possible that some are universal or nearly so (for an overview of the evidence, see Davies [2016]).

Third, beauty is *valuable*. It is an aspect of beauty in general that its experience is valuable in itself [Scruton 2009: ch. 1]. This extends to human beauty. We compliment people who are beautiful, and typically try to attend to, preserve, and enhance our own beauty. Of course, our pursuit of beauty might be also motivated by a more-or-less conscious awareness of the advantages that it confers. But it would be mistaken to think that beauty is valued merely instrumentally. It is a feature that we cherish independently of the benefits that it might bring. But benefits it *does* bring, as I detail in the following section.

## 3. Beauty and Inequality

I shall now introduce some of the inequalities that result from differences in beauty, and explain why they are normally taken to be in need of rectification. Because the literature on lookism is in broad agreement on these points, I discuss them only briefly.<sup>3</sup>

Starting from inequality in wages, a recent study [Monk et al. 2021: 200] finds that

the magnitude of the earnings disparity among white men along the perceived attractiveness continuum rivals or perhaps, exceeds the canonical Black-White wage gap in magnitude; and the earnings disparity among White women along this same continuum is larger than the Black-White wage gap using these same data.

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<sup>2</sup> See Paris [2018] and Doran [2021] for a defence of the moral beauty view, according to which virtue is beautiful and vice is ugly.

<sup>3</sup> For other discussions of disadvantages due to one's looks, see Rhode [2010: ch. 2], Hamermesh [2011], Minerva [2017: 180–2], and Irvin [2017: 2–5], among others.

Daniel Hamermesh [2011: ch. 7] estimates that, on average, a good-looking worker earns \$230,000 more in their lifetime than a bad-looking one. Moving to the sphere of romantic relationships, beauty affects one's prospects for marrying a spouse with a high educational level [ibid.].

The financial and romantic spheres might also interact in ways that exacerbate these inequalities, as suggested by the correlation between one's attractiveness and one's spouse's educational attainment. A growing inverse correlation between household income and obesity has been documented in the United States [Bentley et al. 2018]. Explanations for this phenomenon are varied, but a possibility is that its recent onset is driven by male preference for thinner spouses [Hruschka and Han 2017].

At this point, a sceptic could object that not all societal inequalities need rectification. We do not blame the intelligent and hard-working for the benefits that they accrue, nor do we compensate those who lack talent or discipline for the opportunities that they miss. The reply that hard work and dedication are under one's control will not work against this objection, for it does not convincingly extend to intelligence and other abilities. It is also unclear how much one can work on one's indolence, nor is it impossible to improve one's appearance. A better reply to the sceptic's objection is that the rewards for intelligence and dedication are largely *merited*, whereas those that stem from beauty are typically unwarranted. This is because it appears to be a fact of human psychology that judgments of human beauty spill over to other, unrelated evaluative dimensions, affecting the way that we perceive people's competence, achievements, and other features. The phenomenon is an instance of what is normally referred to as the 'halo effect', first reported and theorized by Edward Thorndike [1920].

A striking example of the halo effect produced by beauty is the advantage that it confers in legal settings, in which attractiveness increases one's chances of being acquitted, and decreases the severity of punishment if convicted [Darby and Jeffers 1988]. In the financial sphere, a study on job market outcomes for high-school graduates concluded that attractiveness might have a larger impact on earnings than ability [Fletcher 2009]. To take a final example from the domain of education, attractive children are perceived by teachers as more competent than unattractive ones [Parks and Kennedy 2007].

The inequalities that I described earlier must therefore be considered in light of the halo effect and its consequences. We can concede to the sceptic that *some* of the inequalities might be due to legitimate rewards for one's beauty. The point is simply that a sizeable portion of the gap in outcomes is unmerited, thus providing a *prima facie* reason to think that we should do something for the aesthetically disadvantaged.

There might be more sophisticated arguments than the sceptical argument that I have considered above against the idea that these disadvantages are unmerited, or that we need to do something about them. However, because my goal in this paper is to discuss anti-lookist strategies that broadly take such disadvantages to be in need of rectification, I shall also accept this reasonable assumption.

#### 4. Two Strategies Against Lookism

In this section, I introduce a distinction between two possible approaches to lookism—*redistributive* strategies and *revisionary* ones.

Redistributive strategies represent the most common kind of proposal. Such approaches argue that we should expand our current, narrow standards of beauty. The result would be a more compressed distribution of people on the beauty spectrum, and thus presumably a reduced level of discrimination. It should be clear why I call such approaches ‘redistributive’: they conceive of beauty as a good, the distribution of which is causing consequences that are morally problematic. On this basis, they suggest various ways to alter such distribution.

Francesca Minerva’s [2017] proposal is exemplary of redistributive approaches. She argues that it is plausible to consider beauty as emanating from two sources. The first is the supposed evolutionary benefit that correlates with features such as facial symmetry or skin quality, while the second source is represented by various societal dynamics, such as the prevalence of certain features, the influence of individuals or groups promoting a given beauty standard, etc. Minerva [ibid.: 185–6] reasonably assumes that societal changes will not be able to dislodge beauty norms of the former kind, and argues that, in order to address the discrimination that they produce, we could opt for policy interventions such as free or subsidized plastic surgery, whereas the disadvantage produced by norms that stem from societal circumstances are best tackled through interventions that promote more inclusive beauty standards.

Discussing bias against fat people, Eaton [2016] supports a redistributive proposal when she argues that we should ‘work to undermine our pervasive collective distaste for fat’ [ibid.: 48]. Tena Thau [2020] considers the possible benefits of an ‘attraction-expanding technology’, which would expand the number of people whom we find attractive.<sup>4</sup>

The list of redistributive proposals could continue. Indeed, this is the approach that people tend to adopt when they think that there is something wrong with current beauty standards, and so it is easy to find it exemplified in mainstream media debates. A redistributive approach seems also to be behind the recent push to feature a wider variety of bodies in advertisement, movies, etc.

Revisionary strategies are less commonly found in public discussion. These approaches enjoin us to reject our current conception of human beauty, in favour of one that is more compatible with various social justice goals. Although their proponents do not describe them as such, revisionary proposals may be seen as examples of conceptual engineering. Consider, for instance, the characterization offered by Alexis Burgess and David Plunkett, who claim that ‘[t]he prototypical/paradigmatic projects in conceptual engineering ... are exercises in conceptual innovation, guided by conceptual ethics, with an eye (and likely some effort put toward) effecting actual conceptual change’ [2020: 6].

The earliest example of a revisionary strategy is perhaps the one sketched by Naomi Wolf [2002]. Having argued that standard beauty judgments contribute to the oppression of women, she states that beauty should be ‘reinterpreted’ in a way that renders it ‘*noncompetitive, nonhierarchical, and nonviolent*’ [ibid.: 286]. The second feature that she mentions is presumably the opposite of what I characterised above as the *comparative* nature of human beauty. Wolf explicitly describes this as a different ‘definition’ of beauty, one that is ‘prowoman’ [ibid.: 290]. The theoretical details of this revised notion of beauty are not clearly discussed by Wolf, but it is clear that this emancipatory

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<sup>4</sup> For reasons that will soon be clear, this proposal would best be classified as revisionary if the technology in question eliminated entirely people’s capacity to draw attractiveness comparisons.

beauty should involve the rejection of norms that allow comparative judgments, and a cherishing of an individual's autonomous choices in the realm of appearance.

Note that Wolf's idea is not simply that we should flank the existing conception of beauty with a different one, but rather that we should reject the former in favour of the latter. This is the crucial feature of revisionary approaches, as I define them here. To elaborate on this point, we can distinguish between *strong* revisionary strategies, which hold that a revised notion of beauty should take the place of standard beauty judgments, and *weak* revisionary strategies, which propose alternative conceptions of bodily beauty without arguing for the elimination of current practices. We could also refer to this latter approach as a *pluralist* strategy.<sup>5</sup> To clarify this distinction, I shall consider the proposal advanced by Céline Leboeuf [2019]. She describes an appreciative practice of one's embodied sensations, which she calls 'sensualism' [ibid.: 15]. Sensualism helps in countering the alienating effects of beauty standards imposed from the outside, for it promotes one's appreciation of the bodily pleasure that accompanies various physical activities. Leboeuf explicitly states that the sensualist approach and canonical beauty standards might 'coexist' [ibid.: 18]. It is not entirely clear to me whether she is saying that (1) engagement in standard beauty judgments is *psychologically compatible* with the pursuit of sensualism, or (2) we are morally justified in maintaining our standard evaluative practices once we also embrace the sensualist alternative. Leboeuf is not operating within the distinction between strong and weak revisionary proposals that I have traced, and so it is perfectly acceptable for her proposal to be unclear in this respect. All that I want to point out here is that, *if* it is read as (2), Leboeuf's view counts as a weak revisionary strategy under my distinction.

At this point, one could object that standard beauty judgments are impossible to eliminate, either because they are part of human nature, or because the societal structures that support them will never disappear completely. Therefore, all revisionary proposals are weak by necessity, even though they might be strong by design. But this objection misses the mark, for the distinction is between different conceptions not of what is realistically achievable, but of what is morally ideal. A look at a highly unlikely but logically possible scenario can clarify the point. Suppose that we perfected our gene editing techniques to the extent that we are able to eliminate the psychological ability to produce standard beauty judgments. Assuming, for the sake of the argument, that we had no moral qualms about gene editing in general, should we look favourably at such an intervention? Strong revisionary proposals answer the question in the affirmative.

I introduce now three more revisionary strategies. In discussing sexiness, Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin explicitly describe their proposal as 'revisionist' [2016: 300]. They argue that we should reject our current norms of sexiness, which require us to abide by externally dictated norms, to a conception of sexiness as the autonomous and spontaneous manifestations of one's sexual identity. Indicative of such genuineness of sexual expression are one's 'originality, comfort, confidence, playfulness, and a sense of improvisation' [ibid.: 308].

Irvin [2017] also proposes an additional revisionary strategy, centred around a practice that she terms 'aesthetic exploration'.<sup>6</sup> Aesthetic exploration requires 'a disposition

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this terminological suggestion.

<sup>6</sup> Because I am unsure about the relation of Irvin's proposal to the one that she jointly advances with Lintott, I do not discuss this matter here.

to seek out that object's particular aesthetic affordances and enjoy them' [ibid.: 9]. That this could lead us to an aesthetic appreciation of all human bodies is predicated on the reasonable assumption that 'living human bodies, all of them, do have very rich affordances by virtue of their colors, textures, ever-shifting forms, complex structures, capacities for movement, and so forth. The human body—every human body—is an incredibly replete aesthetic object' [ibid.: 14–15]. On this basis, Irvin claims that aesthetic exploration has the potential to overturn the comparative (and therefore inegalitarian) character of standard beauty judgments.

As in Leboeuf's case, it is hard to say whether Irvin's proposal should be classified as a strong, or as a weak, form of revisionism. At the beginning of the paper, she writes that 'we should actively *work to reduce* our participation in standard aesthetic practices that involve attractiveness judgments' [ibid.: 1, emphasis added]. This is compatible with a weak reading, but some remarks at the end of her article suggest a strong interpretation: Irvin argues that we might be able to 'gradually shift our aesthetic practice', adding that the cultivation of aesthetic exploration might allow us to 'loosen, and perhaps eventually eliminate, the grip of attractiveness assessments on our minds' [ibid.: 19]. This suggests that a complete elimination of standard beauty judgments would be ideal. Again, I am not concerned with settling the exegetical side of the issue. My aim is to note that revisionary proposals may be understood in two different ways, and to argue against their strong interpretation.

To motivate the revisionary nature of her proposal, Irvin notes an interesting asymmetry between racism and lookism. Following a tradition that can be traced back at least to Hume, she holds beauty/ugliness judgments to be partly constituted by the pleasure/displeasure that they occasion in the experiencing subject. This, she argues, leaves little room for strategies that attempt to reduce our bias. Lookist bias is built into beauty judgments in a way that has no parallel in racist or sexist discrimination [ibid.: 6–7]. This conclusion is premised on the claim that the pleasure that comes with beauty is necessarily corrupting of one's judgment with regard to other evaluative dimensions. This seems more an empirical claim than something that could be derived from an analysis of the logical structure of the judgment of taste. But I am not interested in pressing this point here. Rather, I want to point out another crucial difference between race or gender discrimination and the discrimination based on standard beauty judgments. It is a matter of debate what, if anything, is picked out by race terms. Without taking a stance on this, my goal here is to claim that, while terms such as 'ugly' and 'beautiful' capture different degrees in the realization of a certain value, this has no parallel in the case of race. Race categories are contingently valuable in that they guide our actions in addressing discrimination and oppression, as well as in the protection of vulnerable manifestations of culture that might be associated with, and valuable to, members of a given group. However, in a world free from racist discrimination, and without any appreciable correlation between race and culture, we could get rid of race categories without any value being lost. Not so with human beauty. Its erasure would eliminate a dimension of human value. Even if we think that eliminating conventional human beauty is a fair price to pay in order to achieve a more equitable society, we will agree that some value has been sacrificed to the pursuit of fairness and equality. The point is that revisionary strategies, under their strong interpretation, involve a trade-off between value and justice. A valuable aspect of human life is sacrificed to a more just and equitable society.

The claim is thus not simply that human beauty is *valued*, but rather that it is inherently or intrinsically *valuable*. Consider again race: even if it were established that the historical emergence of race categories was grounded in the misguided evaluative considerations of racists, and even if we agreed that the continued use of such categories is partly justified by their usefulness in addressing past and present discrimination, these claims would fall short of the view that race is inherently or intrinsically valuable, in the way that human beauty is.<sup>7</sup>

A *prima facie* reason in support of the value claim that I made just now about human beauty is that it follows from a rather orthodox claim with regard to the inherent value of beauty in general. But options are available for a more particularized account of the value of human beauty, and such options might help to characterize the specific value of human beauty, and its irreducibility to the value of beauty in art or nature.<sup>8</sup>

First, the practices surrounding human beauty are not easily reducible to those involved in either artistic appreciation or natural appreciation. As in the latter case, the appreciation of human beauty does not always require us to postulate a creative intent on the part of an agent, but, much like in the former case, creative agency is often involved in it.

Second, human beauty, in so far as it is attributed to individual human bodies, has a peculiar connection to personal identity and self-presentation.

Third, the comparative, standards-based character of human beauty practices makes them similar to several other activities that are commonly and plausibly regarded as good in themselves—those activities that ‘involve the exercise of an ability or skill or the attainment of some degree of excellence by some standard’ [Frankena 1973: 91].

Given the widely accepted idea that beauty in general is inherently or intrinsically valuable, and given these additional reasons to hold human beauty to be valuable, the burden of proof is on the proponents of revisionary strategies to show that human beauty *isn't* inherently or intrinsically valuable.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend a specific account of human beauty as inherently or intrinsically valuable. In fact, those who agree with such a claim may disagree on the exact reason why this is so. However, in so far as they share a commitment to the value claim, they should also subscribe to the arguments that I develop in the following section.

As final example of revisionary strategy, I shall consider the one advanced by Sara Protasi [2017]. She explicitly faults Irvin’s aesthetic exploration view for eliminating the *aspirational* aspect of beauty. Beauty is something that we can possess in greater or lesser degree, and its pursuit might be empowering [ibid.: 94]. As an ideal of beauty that is both aspirational and inclusive, Protasi suggests ‘loving gaze’, according to which ‘the most beautiful individuals are the most lovable ones, independently of what they look like from the outside’ [ibid.: 99]. This view of beauty preserves an aspirational element, in the form of the aspiration to be an individual that is more

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for pressing me on these points.

<sup>8</sup> As an example, Glenn Parsons [2016] defends a conception of human beauty as the pursuit of bodily perfection. As such a pursuit, Parson argues, beauty is an ineliminable concern for physical creatures, because it is intimately tied to the satisfaction of basic needs requiring physical qualities. This leaves open the possibility of changes in the specific feature that count towards bodily perfection, but rules out the complete elimination of standard-based ascriptions of beauty.

worthy of love. It also maintains the ‘*irreducibly and authentically* aesthetical’ character of standard beauty [ibid.]. One could question Protasi’s claim that her reformed conception of beauty is genuinely aesthetic. As a moral notion, one’s worthiness to be loved does not depend on one’s appearance, or on the features of other people’s experience of such appearance. It is surely plausible to say that, once we consider someone worthy of love, this affects our experience of them, including the experience of their appearance. But it would still be the case that this change in our experience is entirely dependent on our correct judgment with regard to their worthiness to be loved, and in no way dependent on our assessment of how they look. Our aesthetic experience of people might reflect their worthiness to be loved, but it is not a proxy for such worthiness. But there is another crucial aspect to Protasi’s view: worthiness to be loved is necessary to the loving gaze but does not command it. There is a subjective, or better, *relational* element to the loving gaze, in that we reserve it for people to whom we are connected through friendship or love. Loving gaze ‘has a subjectivist streak, due to its relation to the particularism that unavoidably stems from our loving relationships’ [ibid.]. It is this subjective loving gaze that constitutes the properly aesthetic element in the proposal. At this point, however, it is unclear how this view allows us to say that some people are more beautiful than others, unless the judgment is indexed to a particular subject, at a particular time (alas, often not a long one). This capricious character of beauty attributions appears in contrast to the idea that beauty is aspirational, a feature of standard beauty that Protasi wants her revised conception to preserve.

Leaving aside these problems, the main point that I want to stress here is that, even if Protasi’s revised notion of beauty is genuinely aesthetic, and allows for genuine comparative judgments, these features do not change the revisionary nature of her proposal. The practice that she describes attributes value according to a structure that is similar to standard beauty judgments (a comparative, or hierarchical, one), but it is fundamentally a different practice, underscored by a different value.

A possible objection to the distinction that I have proposed is that the line between redistributive and revisionary approaches is not as clear-cut as first appears. Redistributive approaches might call for (1) measures that help people to achieve beauty according to canonical standards, and/or (2) changes in the standards themselves. We could call this latter approach an *expansionist* strategy.<sup>9</sup> Any modification to a concept’s application that changes its extension must be considered a modification of the concept itself, and so it is unclear why redistribution, especially as pursued by expansionist approaches, does not also imply revision. I concede this, but I deny that it should make us question the usefulness of the distinction between redistributive and revisionary strategies. A major difference is that redistributive approaches do not challenge any of the three central features of beauty that I described in section 2: human beauty is appearance-based, comparative, and valuable. I think that using such features to trace the line between revisionary and redistributive strategies allows us to track a useful and intuitive distinction between strategies that require us to merely modify the criteria involved in a given practice (redistributive approaches) and those that enjoin us to substitute it with a different one (revisionary approaches). Consider what happens when one attempts to adjust one’s beauty standards to those of a different socio-cultural setting. This requires a readjustment in the features of

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<sup>9</sup> I am again indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this label.

people's appearance that count as beautiful, but it does not involve any change in those three fundamental features of human beauty introduced above.

For these reasons, I think it is fair to say that the distinction that I have traced is sound and useful. The value-justice trade-off, conceived as the requirement to give up a valuable practice, only applies to revisionary proposals (under their strong interpretation).

## 5. Two Problems for Revisionary Strategies

I have claimed that revisionary proposals imply a compromise between value and justice. In this section, I will argue that that this compromise makes revisionary proposals less appealing than redistributive ones. I shall employ some concepts borrowed from the debate on distributive justice. Existing work on lookism rarely, if ever, situates the discussion in the context of a philosophical theory of justice.<sup>10</sup> I do not wish to claim that it is necessary to do so, or that my present treatment of the connection is in any way conclusive. I simply hope to show that this connection is a useful and profitable one to draw.

With the exception of Protasi's view, an aspect common to the revisionary strategies that I have presented above is that they develop conceptions of human beauty or attractiveness that are explicitly aimed to extend to (nearly) everyone. This is perhaps most explicit in Lintott and Irvin's proposal about sexiness, and in Irvin's aesthetic exploration view. These are broadly egalitarian views, in that they argue that we should move from a highly uneven distribution of beauty to a situation where beauty is equally distributed. But some care is required. It is, strictly speaking, incorrect to say that revisionary strategies advocate for the redistribution of a specific good— beauty. Rather, they argue that we should swap this good for a more equally distributed one—their preferred revised notion of beauty. It is thus a consequence of revisionary strategies that the good in question does not survive the successful application of such strategies. Standard beauty is no longer available in the ideal world in which it is replaced by aesthetic exploration (Irvin) or worthiness to be loved (Protasi). With this caveat in place, we shall see that revisionary proposals are vulnerable to an objection.

Revisionary strategies propose to level the playing field by depriving everybody of a valuable dimension. Redistributive approaches, on the other hand, propose to improve the condition of the aesthetically disadvantaged by intervening directly on their aesthetic disadvantage.

One could argue that, because beauty is a positional good, redistributive approaches not only increase the beauty of the aesthetically disadvantaged, but also decrease that of the aesthetically advantaged. But this does not change the main point that the redistributive approach does not require us to abandon a valuable practice. One could also observe that revisionary proposals introduce *new* valuable practices, and thus cannot be faulted for eliminating older ones. For instance, the proponent of aesthetic exploration is not asking us to give up the valuable dimension of experiencing bodies aesthetically; it is simply requiring us to adopt a new practice in this domain. But this objection faces two problems. First, aesthetic exploration is not a *new* practice. It has

<sup>10</sup> Legal strategies aimed at countering lookist discrimination have been developed and defended at length. Rhode [2010] is perhaps the most significant example. My point here is that such work normally avoids discussing in detail the philosophical basis of claims to rectification or redistribution.

probably never been explicitly described before, or at least not as perceptively as Irvin does, but it is something that I regularly find myself doing, and I suspect that others do so, too. The point extends to other candidate revisionary proposals. Therefore, it is questionable to say that a revisionary proposal *adds* valuable practices to our lives. Second, even if we concede that some value is introduced by expanding the practice of aesthetic exploration (or by adopting some other revisionary solution), it may be argued that it is not ideal to tackle injustices by adopting approaches that requires people to give up their valuable practices in favour of others. If options are available that do not require this compromise, they should be preferred.

A first objection against revisionary proposals is thus that it is comparatively preferable to address a disadvantage in a way that does not involve a generalized loss of value, but that selectively improves the condition of the disadvantaged. In this sense, redistributive strategies are preferable to revisionary ones.

Note that this is *unlike* the standard anti-egalitarian Levelling Down Objection [Parfit 1997]. The Levelling Down Objection opposes equality as valuable in itself, because considering it as such would result in taking an arrangement in which A and B are equally badly off as preferable to a situation in which A is as badly off as in the first arrangement, while B is well off, or at least better off than A. But this preference is absurd. Therefore, equality cannot be considered intrinsically valuable. The compromise involved in revisionary approaches shares with levelling-down scenarios the fact that no one is made better off with respect to a given dimension (beauty, standardly conceived), but it is distinct from such scenarios because the overall condition of those who were worse-off is presumably improved: because they no longer suffer from an aesthetic disadvantage, they will not be unfairly discriminated, and their life prospects will benefit as a consequence.

Those who oppose egalitarianism sometimes opt for a *sufficientarian* view: what matters is not that everyone has just as much of a given good, but rather that everyone has enough of it (see, for instance, Frankfurt [1987]). In the extant literature on body aesthetics, a sufficientarian objection to a revisionary view is offered by Hans Maes [2017], although he does not describe it as such. His target is Lintott and Irvin's proposal. Maes [ibid.: 204] distinguishes between 'appearing sexy to someone' and 'being generally considered sexy'. Lintott and Irvin propose an egalitarian conception of sexiness in order to address the harms suffered by those whose sexuality is ignored. They argue in favour of the elimination of an elitist conception of 'being generally considered sexy'. But this, argues Maes, is to overreach. To address those harms, it would be sufficient to acknowledge the sexuality of, say, disabled or old people, in such a way as to allow them to have a meaningful sexual life. In other words, it would be sufficient for them to appear sexy to enough people as to allow meaningful sexual encounters.

Here it is worth dwelling on the distinction between beauty and attractiveness (or sexiness), the latter being one's capacity to arouse sexual interest. It is plausible to argue that the case for redistributing the former is not as strong as the case for the redistribution of the latter, regardless of whether one thinks that either of the two is warranted. John Danaher [2020] argues that sexual inclusion is part of the goods that fall under the purview of a theory of distributive justice, because having a sexual life is part of what it is to have a purposeful and meaningful life [ibid.: 6]. It does not seem plausible to make the same case for human beauty. One's ugliness is detrimental to one's flourishing because, under current circumstances, it will affect one's

opportunities in an arbitrary and unjust way. It is of course possible, and perhaps necessary, to address this situation by redistributing beauty. But this is compatible with treating such redistribution as merely instrumental to addressing those unfair disadvantages. It does not require commitment to the view that beauty should be redistributed such that everyone be considered minimally beautiful—a commitment that revisionary views tend to share. Redistributive approaches avoid such problems. No specific distributive pattern is considered desirable in itself. Redistribution is merely instrumental to improving the well-being of the aesthetically disadvantaged.

I move now to a second objection against revisionary strategies. We have seen that strong revisionary strategies entail a trade-off between value and justice. The gain in justice consists in the elimination of the unfair disadvantage for those whose appearance is aesthetically defective, and in the elimination of unmerited advantages for those who are good looking. If the strategy is supported by anything like a general principle, it makes sense to think that a revisionary strategy should be applied in the case of all values and practices that result in similar injustices. But this extension of the strategy, I shall argue, lessens its appeal.

In fairness to the advocates of revisionary human beauty practices, none of them explicitly advocates for such an extension of the revisionary strategy to any domain or practice that behaves like human beauty. In fact, as I noted in the previous section, the general principles that ground the normative strength of their proposals are normally left undiscussed. A principle seems to be implied, according to which values or practices are always blameworthy, and in need of reform, if they result in unmerited inequalities. This principle is questionable. As I argue in what follows, its extended application deprives us of an increasing number of valuable practices, and does so in exchange for diminishing returns in people's well-being.

There are various human activities that are impossible to carry out without regular systematic disadvantages resulting from them. Starting from other cases in the aesthetic domain, taste in clothing is a case in point, as are other cases of bodily adornment—hair styles, jewellery, tattoos, etc.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, we sometimes evaluate people on the basis of their taste in art, food, interior design, etc., and these evaluations sometimes affect one's prospects in life. It is far from clear that all of the ensuing advantages and disadvantages are merited.

Perhaps one could say that these cases are not as problematic as beauty, because they are more dependent on one's initiative, whereas beauty is less so. This is reasonable, but it is also obvious that we are not dealing with a clear-cut distinction: there are ways that one can improve one's bodily beauty, and there might be individual limits to the perfecting of one's taste.

Spillover effects are not limited to the domain of beauty and taste. In fact, Thorndike's seminal study on the topic attempted to measure the halo effect of 'physical qualities', specified as '[p]hysique, bearing, neatness, voice, energy and endurance' [1920: 27]. Voice quality is an interesting example. Various positive and negative personality traits are attributed to people on the basis of how their voice sounds, although voice quality is not a reliable predictor of those traits (see, for instance, McAleer et al. [2014]).

To take a different example, a recent study has attempted to empirically investigate people's concepts of beauty, sexiness, elegance, and grace [Menninghaus et al. 2019].

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<sup>11</sup> On the importance of adornment to human aesthetic sensibility, see Davies [2020].

In the case of elegance, it found an association with ‘non-physical person variables’ that resembles the spillover effect produced by beauty or attractiveness.<sup>12</sup> Elegance was associated with adjectives such as ‘intelligent’, ‘honest’, ‘witty’, ‘creative’, and ‘caring’. The authors observe that ‘[t]hese elegance-driven inferences can be considered an analogue to the physical attractiveness stereotype, i.e., to the attribution of several personality traits dependent on physical attractiveness’ [ibid.: 7].

The values involved in the broader domain of social interactions are also likely to involve spillover effects. The sociable and charismatic benefit from their sociability and charisma in ways that are no less arbitrary than those found in the domain of beauty.

That a revisionary strategy naturally extends to domains other than human bodily beauty is not itself a criticism of this approach. But the more that this extension eats away at valuable human practices, the more unappealing the strategy becomes. This is because the advantageous and disadvantageous features that I have described are not clustered. The attractive person is not necessarily charismatic, and the sociable is not always elegant. Extending the trade-off implies an increasing loss of valuable dimensions of human life, but it is doubtful that the well-being of the people affected will be correspondently improved. Are the proponents of revisionary approaches committed to this extension? Without a clear formulation of their guiding principles, it is hard to say. If the principle is the one that I outlined above, then the extension is required, and any restriction to a special domain (for instance, bodily beauty) would be *ad hoc*.

Note that these considerations do not extend to discriminatory practices such as racism. As I argued above, no loss of value is involved in combating such discriminations. There is no arguing against them on the ground of diminishing returns in the face of increasing loss of value, because no value is lost in the first place.

When it comes to this second problem, redistributive strategies once again fare better than revisionary ones do. Because they do not require a radical revision of our practices, they can tackle the full extension of discrimination along multiple dimensions without loss of value. It might be that other considerations will count against their extension. For instance, they might turn out to require resources that are best allocated elsewhere. But this does not affect their comparative advantage over revisionary strategies, for presumably the extended implementation of such strategies will also entail an increasing expenditure of resources of some kind.

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that it is useful to distinguish between redistributive and revisionary proposals against lookism, and I have further claimed that revisionary views may be interpreted in two ways. Against the strong interpretation, I have raised two objections. First, they entail a compromise between value and justice that redistributive approaches do not require us to make. Second, they appear to rest on a normative principle that would require the revision of several human practices other than human beauty. This extension would be hard to implement, and its returns in terms of people’s well-being only minimal, or at any rate not worth the loss of several valuable human practices.

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<sup>12</sup> Elegance remains an underdiscussed topic in the aesthetics literature, but see Hanson [1990] and Baldini [2018].

Several avenues for further research are left open. First, one should ask whether redistributive strategies face problems of their own. These problems might be serious enough to shift the balance in favour of revisionary approaches, or to support the conclusion that no existing strategy against lookism is worth pursuing.

Second, weak revisionary views are left untouched by the criticisms raised in this paper. It is thus possible to ask whether weak revisionary strategies might coexist with redistributive approaches, and how exactly the two might work together.<sup>13</sup>

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