

[1,982 WORDS W/O BIB]

## BEAUTY AND LOVE

There is a long tradition in aesthetics according to which beauty has a constitutive, illuminating, or otherwise theoretically significant connection to love, though exactly what this connection is thought to be varies dramatically. Theories of beauty that place a special emphasis on love are generally contrasted with theories whose central affective notion is pleasure or enjoyment. This article sketches the history, plausibility, and contemporary import of the view that, roughly, beauty is the object of love.

**HISTORY.** The thought that beauty has a theoretically significant connection to love has a long history of philosophical support. Although a comprehensive account of this history is not possible in this short article, a brief survey of some of the basic variations on the view is in order. Included in this long tradition are views according to which beauty is what warrants love, causes love, inspires love, or is deeply analogous to love.

Perhaps the most venerable expression of such a view is found among the fragments of the poet Sappho. Fragment 16 states that “Some men say an army of horses and some men say an army on foot / and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing / on this black earth. But I say it is / ... what you love.” (Carson) Taken as a proposal about the nature of beauty, we might express the view as follows: the highest degree of beauty is possessed by the objects of love. So if a man loves an army of horses or ships, then that will be what is most beautiful to him. On such a view, the highest degree of beauty is relative to individuals and what they love.

Understood in this way, Sappho's view is limited because it says nothing about things that possess less than the highest beauty. Plato's view in *Symposium* is similar but more general. It is not a view merely about the "highest beauty". According to Plato, beauty is the object of love in the sense that beauty is the *basic aim* of love. Plato's word for love is *erôs*, which he seems to think of as, roughly, a kind of desirous and aspirational emotion. A straightforward way of understanding this view is to see Plato as construing love as a kind of emotion that takes beauty as its formal object. In this way, the relation between love and beauty is like the relation between any emotion and its formal object. For example, the formal object of anger is offensiveness; an instance of anger is correct only if its intentional object is offensive. Likewise, an instance of love, or *erôs*, is appropriate only if its intentional object is beautiful.

Plato's view in *Symposium* influenced a wide range of subsequent philosophers. A notable variation on a Platonic view is contained in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Burke agrees with Plato in giving love a central place in his theory of beauty, but he claims that the relevant kind of love is different from desire or longing. Burke defines beauty as "that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it." (Pt. III, §I) Burke explicitly distinguishes between love and desire, writing that "I likewise distinguish love...from desire or lust. ...beauty, and the passion caused by beauty, which I call love, is different from desire, though desire may sometimes operate along with it" (83). Thus, Burke holds the Platonic view that beauty is essentially related to a passion aptly called love, but he departs from Plato in at least two respects. In addition to his emphasis on distinguishing between love and desire or longing—and

even allowing, apparently, that desire is *not* a part of love's essence—, Burke restricts his view to the thought that beauty is “that quality or those qualities” which *cause* love and does not make the further normative claim that love “aims at” beauty.

Another variation on a Platonic view is Franz Brentano's view in *The Origin of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong*. According to Brentano, an object is beautiful if a mental state directed at it arouses love that is correct. However, it is unclear whether Brentano belongs squarely in what we might call the “Platonic tradition” because, unlike Plato, it is not clear that Brentano's notion of love as applied to beauty is any different from that of pleasure. This makes his theory of beauty potentially less interesting from the point of view that love in particular—a distinctive kind of emotion—should play an important role in the theory of beauty.

More recently in *Beauty Restored* (1984), Mary Mothersill explicitly agrees with what she takes to be the basic tenets of Plato's theory of beauty and claims that they “commend themselves to common sense...as fundamental truths” about beauty. (262) These are that beauty is (1) a kind of good that (2) can be possessed by any kind of thing and that (3) is pleasurable and inspires love. (262) Unfortunately, she has little to say about (3). She writes that Plato “seems to me to be right in his perception of the link between Eros and beauty,” and notes that we literally love certain objects of beauty. But she does not say how we should understand the connection between beauty and love. “The question,” she writes, “is worth further study.”

Further study has come most notably in the form of a book by Alexander Nehamas and a paper by Richard Moran, both of whom are influenced by Mothersill. (Another relevant study that is

difficult to classify is Guy Sircello's *Beauty and Love*, which draws on his insightful *A New Theory of Beauty*.) The most ambitious contemporary articulation of the view that beauty is the object of love is contained in Alexander Nehamas's book *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. Nehamas's view is that to find something beautiful is to want to possess it: beauty is the object of love in the Platonic sense of *eros* or desire, but the desire to possess the beautiful is not the desire to *own* it—rather, it is the desire to *understand* it. And this desire to understand beauty is inseparable from a sense that engaging with the object of beauty will somehow improve or enhance our lives. Beauty, Nehamas thinks, is inseparable from this “forward looking” element, from the promise that “possessing” (*i.e.* understanding) the object of beauty can improve or enhance one's life—a promise which the beautiful may or may not be able to keep. Nehamas takes a stand with Stendhal, who wrote that “Beauty is only the promise of happiness”.

Richard Moran shares Nehamas's wish to characterize beauty partly in terms of the way in which beauty shapes our lives. (And both have serious reservations about Kant's claim that judgments of beauty contain a demand that others agree with one's judgment.) In “Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty,” Moran likens the norms of our responsiveness to beauty to the norms of responsiveness that structure loving relationships between persons. Part of loving another person is being subject to certain norms of responsiveness and attention, and these norms are such that failure to meet them can amount to a loss of self. Drawing on several striking passages from Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, Moran argues that we can understand the encounter with beauty as displaying patterns of responsiveness and attention that mirror those we are familiar with in love. Considering Proust's numerous, astonishingly subtle observations

about the connection between beauty and love, Moran issues the interesting 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." (303-04)

**ASSESSMENT OF THE VIEW** Perhaps the most straightforward way of understanding the claim that beauty is the object of love—as a philosophical claim about the essence of beauty—is to say, at the very least, that beauty is essentially that which merits love, where love is the emotional response we are familiar with from our interactions with lovers, friends, and family. Beauty is that in response to which love is *merited* or *appropriate*, leaving open the question of precisely which normative term is best.

The first challenge to any such view is to say exactly what notion of *love* is at issue. (Berys Gaut (2010) raises this problem in a recent symposium on Nehamas's book.) First of all, it seems that a parent's love for his wayward and obnoxious child might be appropriate even though the child is neither externally nor internally beautiful—and admittedly so by the parent. Secondly, many things are beautiful that, at least on the surface, are not objects of the kind of love we have for our partners, friends, and family. Forests, flowers, sunsets, waves, and many other natural objects and events are beautiful—some even supremely so—but are inappropriate objects of the kind of love we are familiar with in interpersonal love, which is commonly thought to be essentially interpersonal.

Another way of formulating this worry is the following. If beauty is the object of love, then we need to know precisely what notion of love is at issue. If we follow Brentano and expand love to

a notion of, roughly, *positive attitude*, then the view will be too inclusive. But if we narrow it to interpersonal love, then natural beauty seems to be excluded. So how exactly should we understand the relevant notion of love?

Another major source of concern about the view that beauty is the object of love centers around its apparent incompatibility with other central tenets in the theory of beauty. Consider the influential Kantian claim that beauty is the object of disinterested pleasure. Intuitively, in general, our love is bound up with our sense of self, our friendships, ideals, and projects—in short, with our *individual* or *personal* sense of the kind of life worth our living. If beauty warrants love, and our love is personal in this sense, then how can beauty also be disinterested? Similarly, consider Kant’s influential claim that judgments of beauty contain a claim to universal agreement. Again, what we are capable of loving seems to be dramatically variable across subjects, and within subjects across time. If beauty is the object of love, then it is difficult to see how judgments of beauty could contain a claim to universal agreement. Notably, philosophers who tend to favor the view that beauty is the object of love also tend to explicitly distance themselves from these elements of Kantian aesthetics. (However, Kant does acknowledge a connection between beauty and love. In the “General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments” in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant writes, “The beautiful prepares us for loving something, even nature, without interest...” (§29).)

In short, currently there seems to be no widely accepted formulation of even the most straightforward version of the view that beauty is the object of love. And this is due to two sorts

of problem: first, all available formulations are problematic; and second, the view seems to conflict with elements of Kant's still widely influential aesthetics.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**            There seems to be a couple of clear ways to engage in the "further study" recommended by Mary Mothersill. In general, there is a range of difficult questions facing *any* account of value in terms of "appropriate response". More specifically, the two basic elements of this kind of theory of beauty are (1) that the aesthetic response to beauty is a kind of emotion; and (2) the relevant kind of emotion is love. One line of development concerns a more detailed account of why emotion, rather than a notion of pleasure, is appropriate. This work should draw on current developments in the theory of emotion (and perhaps on psychoanalytic theory; see Wollheim (1984)). One question that should be addressed is, if the aesthetic response to beauty is an emotion, then what is its emotional nature? Many philosophers hold that many emotions have an associated representation that characterizes their intentional objects in a certain evaluative way. For example, the associated representation for envy characterizes a person as, very roughly, unfairly possessing that which one desires but lacks. So, we might ask, what is the associated representation, if any, of the emotion involved in beauty? Answering this question might give us a better grip on why one might count this emotion as a species of love. And here we might draw on the increasingly sophisticated developments in the theory of interpersonal love.

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