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Functional Beauty Examined

Essay Review of Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson's *Functional Beauty*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 2008. Pp. xii + 255.

In *Functional Beauty*, Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson defend the importance of Functional Beauty — that is, the view that an item's fitness (or otherwise) for its proper function is a source of positive (or negative) aesthetic value — within a unified comprehensive aesthetic theory that encompasses art, the everyday, animals and organic nature, natural environments and inorganic nature, and artifacts. In the following section, I outline the main lines of argument presented in the book. I then criticize some of these arguments. I do so, however, from the perspective of someone who shares the authors' commitment to the importance of Functional Beauty and their dismay at its neglect in contemporary aesthetic theory. Notwithstanding the objections I present, I congratulate Parsons and Carlson for developing the case for Functional Beauty to an unprecedented extent. I conclude that their approach presents an important corrective to the narrowness of neo-Kantian aesthetics and opens up aesthetics and the philosophy of art to the influence of and cooperation with the empirical study of aesthetics practiced in the sciences.

I

1. The aim of this book is to rehabilitate the notion of Functional Beauty, which is the view that the match or mismatch between an item's features and its function is a source of aesthetic pleasure or displeasure. I say 'rehabilitate' because, as the authors point out in the first part of

their historical review (1-20), the idea that beauty measures the adequacy of things for their nature or purpose was advocated from ancient times until at least the late eighteenth century. The dominant rival to this account was and remains what Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz dubs the 'Great Theory of Beauty.'[1] In classical times, the Great Theory equated beauty with formal proportion and harmony. In the medieval period this idea was given a theological slant, with the assumption that formal unity and integration are reflections of God's perfection and beauty. And formalism, which received Kant's endorsement at the close of the eighteenth century, was most commonly advocated as the basis of aesthetic beauty into the twentieth century. Nevertheless, as Tatarkiewicz observes, the functional theory of beauty was a long-running supplement to the Great Theory up to the eighteenth century where it appears, for instance, in Hume.

Above all, it was Kant who banished considerations of utility and function from the aesthetic arena. His paradigm of aesthetic appreciation is offered in his account of free beauty, which is the formal beauty of an item regarded disinterestedly and without regard to what kind of thing it is or its roles or purposes (21-4). Recognizing or assessing something's free beauty does not involve bringing it under a determinate concept; rather, it involves the free play of imagination and understanding. Admittedly, Kant also recognizes a kind of 'dependent' or 'adherent' beauty that is conditional on its object's classification. But, according to the account offered by Paul Guyer and followed by Parsons and Carlson, Kant's notion of dependent beauty departs significantly from the notion of Functional Beauty.[2] On this interpretation, Kant allows that recognition of a thing's kind and function can constrain how or what about it can be beautiful, but the relevant qualities do not derive their beauty from the success with which they contribute to its discharging its function; that is, the item's functionality is not a source of its beauty (21-3). As Parsons and Carlson put it, if something possesses Functional Beauty there is an internal connection between its beauty and its function, whereas the connection allowed by Kant in his notion of dependent beauty is external (120-3, 231-3).[3]

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1 Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, 'The Great Theory of Beauty and its Decline,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **31** (1972) 165-80

2 Paul Guyer, 'Beauty and Utility in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* **35** (2002) 439-53

3 In Stephen Davies, 'Aesthetic Judgment, Artworks and Functional Beauty,' *Philosophical Quarterly* **56** (2006) 224-41, I have drawn a similar distinction in trying to locate the relation between aesthetic qualities and function that best characterizes

Later philosophers who adopted Kant's formalism and expanded the notion of disinterested contemplation, which is widely regarded as the state on which aesthetic appreciation is founded, went so far as to insist that all knowledge of an item's kind, origins, history, intended purpose, and potential utility had to be put aside if the appreciator's experience of the item could count as aesthetic (24-30). In the latter part of the twentieth century such views were rejected in favor of a cognitively richer approach to art, but the idea that art can be judged functionally did not figure in this change (31-7). In general, philosophers have tended to regard 'functional art,' such as religious art and architecture, as second-class or impure art. Meanwhile, though the aesthetic appreciation of organic nature may invoke appropriate scientific knowledge of biological function, inorganic nature is typically regarded as not possessing equivalent functions, so reference to functionality does not shape aesthetic judgments directed there (37-42). And interest in a craft item's aesthetic character is usually assumed to involve disregard of its utility.

The primary aim of Parsons and Carlson's *Functional Beauty* is to urge and argue that Functional Beauty makes a significant aesthetic contribution in our appreciation of natural environments, animals, everyday artifacts, architecture, and art, despite philosophers' widespread post-Kantian neglect of this form of beauty. They allow that Functional Beauty is only one among several species of aesthetic beauty (228), but they maintain that it is an important source of aesthetic pleasure. Moreover, acknowledging the place of Functional Beauty in aesthetics has the virtue of enhancing the unity and comprehensiveness of aesthetic theory: the aesthetic significance of Functional Beauty is a theme common to the otherwise disparate arenas listed above, and without resort to the notion of Functional Beauty we cannot explain why aesthetic experience retains a consistent phenomenology as it moves from art to artifacts to nature and back (230-1) or from works of Western fine art via functional art (such as religious art, tragedy, comedy) to the more utilitarian and everyday traditional art of many non-Western societies.

2. If beauty were relative to function and if an item had as many functions as there are possible ways of regarding and using it, then such

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what I also call functional beauty (see 237-8): in the case of functional beauty there is not merely a conjunction of, say, *elegance* and *practicality* but rather a manner of realizing the function that is at the same time aesthetically enhancing, so the item is *elegantly practical*. The item is beautiful both through the manner in which it realizes its nature or function and as a result of its realizing its nature or function in that way.

beauty would lack the objective character that aesthetic theory requires. Some pairs of contrasting judgments, each appealing to different functions an item could perform, would be equally valid, thereby stymieing discourse about aesthetic value. This raises the 'Problem of Indeterminacy,' as Parsons and Carlson label it (50-6). What is needed to meet it is an account of what makes one among many possible functions 'proper' for the item in question.

They begin by rejecting attempts to identify the proper function of humanly created items via reference to their designers' or makers' intentions. That intentions specifying an item's proper function are not sufficient for the conferral of that function is apparent from the fact that others (users, for example) can have relevantly similar intentions without affecting or altering a given item's proper function (62-9), and this is true also where the item in question is an artwork (203-9). Nor are the maker's function-specifying intentions necessary, because something can lose its original proper function and acquire a new one as a result of its subsequent use; the Plaza Major in Madrid was designed as a royal courtyard but its proper function now is as a civic square (64, 147, 150, 208-9). Rather, for human artifacts a certain kind of public uptake, that is, acceptance in the public marketplace, is necessary in establishing their proper functions.

In an attempt to naturalize the account of function, Parsons and Carlson draw on models of functionality developed in the philosophy of science. They first consider Robert Cummins's view that something's function is its causal contribution to the performance of a capacity by a system of which it is a part (69-71).[4] Such a position accounts for an item's functionality, but because anything might occupy roles in many causal systems, and might do so by accident, the causal account does not provide an analysis of *proper* (correct, identifying) function (130-6, 209-16). For that, Parsons and Carlson prefer a *selected effects* theory of biological function: a trait or item X has a proper function F if and only if ancestors of X enhanced fitness by performing F, leading to the reproduction of Xs (71-3).[5] This view is easily extended to artifacts by replacing 'ancestors of X' with 'similar predecessors whose success in the market was a factor in the production of X,' 'enhanced fitness' with

4 Based on Robert Cummins, 'Functional Analysis,' *Journal of Philosophy* **72** (1975) 741-65.

5 Based on Peter Godfrey-Smith, 'A Modern History Theory of Functions,' *Noûs* **28** (1994) 344-62 and Beth Preston, 'Why is a Wing like a Spoon? A Pluralist Theory of Function,' *Journal of Philosophy* **115** (1998) 215-54.

'met some need in the marketplace,' and 'reproduction' with 'manufacture, distribution, or preservation' (73-80, 147-8).

Parsons and Carlson defend their appeal to market forces against the charge that it is bourgeois and conservative (149-54). Their account does allow that a thing's proper function can alter over time: churches can become social clubs and discos. And while it is true that they allow Functional Beauty to things that may be morally problematic, such as weapons and industrial farms, this is because the notion is morally neutral. We can deplore such things and their functions, but it would be mistaken to deny either that they have the (perhaps morally odious) proper functions they have, or that these functions could be fulfilled beautifully by some weapons and farms.

3. The theory of Functional Beauty requires that an item's adaptedness to its proper function be manifest in its appearance and that this appearance have an aesthetic character. To make good such claims, the theory must address its second major difficulty, 'the Problem of Translation' (45-9). The worry here is that it is not easy to see how awareness of a thing's function could affect its perceptible aesthetic qualities.

In responding to the Problem of Translation, Parsons and Carlson rely on an argument produced by Kendall L. Walton.[6] He proposes that for any given genre or category of art, some properties are *standard* in that all or at least paradigmatic instances of that kind of work possess them (for instance, the two-dimensionality of paintings), others are *contra-standard* in counting against category membership (for instance, the use of collage in painting), and others are *variable* (for instance, the way paint is distributed on the surface of a painting). He argues that differences between works in the same category, including differences in aesthetically salient perceptible features, such as representational content and expressiveness, depend mainly on differences in the works' variable properties. As a consequence of the category-relativity of a work of art's aesthetic features, two works that otherwise look alike should nevertheless present disparate aesthetic appearances to an appreciator who knows them to belong to distinct artistic categories.

Parsons and Carlson use the same reasoning and terms, except in relation to *function* rather than to *category* (90-100, 154-61). If an item possesses no properties contra-standard for its proper function, then the more variable properties indicative of its functionality that it possesses, the more it appears fit for its function to a person who is aware of its proper function and how it fulfills it. As examples the authors

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6 Kendall L. Walton, 'Categories of Art,' *Philosophical Review* **79** (1970) 334-67

mention the muscle car that looks built for speed and a fortified castle that looks impregnable.[7] And the more an item appears to have only the standard properties essential for its function, the simpler and more graceful and elegant it will appear to the person aware of that function. As examples they mention a sleek, stainless steel stove and the architectural style of International Modernism. According to Parsons and Carlson, a third way in which function may affect aesthetic appearance arises when an item possesses properties that are contra-standard for its function; it may then 'display a pleasing dissonance in its sensory elements' (98-9). Their examples include building cranes that taper at the base, buildings that seem to hang suspended in mid-air, and present-day churches that are designed to look unchurch-like.

Parsons and Carlson make two replies to the doubt that a concern with fitness could count as aesthetic (100-6, 158-61). The first is that, even if the judgment of fitness is not aesthetic, Functional Beauty includes other judgments that plainly are, namely, those concerned with elegance and grace and with the pleasing tension between an item's function and its apparently contra-functional qualities. The second argument suggests that, in any case, judgments of fitness are aesthetic: judgments of fitness are not reducible solely to judgments about utility because we can have distinct aesthetic preferences for two items that are equally functional. In this respect, they compare a fine Swiss watch with an equally accurate cheap quartz watch; we prefer the former as more fit for its function and this preference is aesthetic because it targets the watch's appearance and not solely its functional success.

Parsons and Carlson also ask if dysfunctionality produces an aesthetic negative, and conclude that it does (107-10, 130-6, 161-6). We are displeased by the sight of a car with flat tires, for example, and this is not solely a practical judgment because we make it when the car is not ours. Moreover, we are more displeased by a car with four flat tires than one with three, yet both cars are equally unusable. And similarly, an uninhabitable house is made aesthetically worse when more of its windows are smashed; also, we are displeased by diseased and damaged animals. As a counterexample to their thesis, Parsons and Carlson consider items of fashion. Women's high-heeled shoes are admired despite being unsuited for walking, but this is because their function as shoes is not attended to. When it is, their ugliness is manifest. The situation with ruined buildings is subtly different, however, because the pleasure

7 The emphasis on appearance in these examples is perhaps misleading. The point, I assume, is not only that the car looks fast and the castle impregnable but also that the car's speed and the castle's invulnerability depend on the qualities that give them the appearances in question.

we take in them typically does not overlook their dysfunctionality. In this case, the aesthetic plus comes from their serving as powerfully expressive symbols of the power of nature, of human transience, and the like. Where the ruins do not have the historical causes that generate this symbolism, their appearance would present an aesthetic defect.

4. The Problems of Indeterminacy and Translation are first introduced in the context of a discussion of architecture (42-53) and, once the theory of Functional Beauty has been developed and explained, they are further applied to the built environment (Chapter Six), including criticism of the doctrines of functionality that motivated Modernist theories of architecture. (It is a special pleasure of this book that it attends so closely to architecture, which is comparatively neglected within aesthetics and the philosophy of art.) Other chapters are devoted to demonstrating the applicability of the account of Functional Beauty variously to living organisms, landscape, and the inorganic environment (Chapter Five), to artifacts and the everyday (Chapter Seven), and finally to art (Chapter Eight).

The stance taken regarding the aesthetics of the everyday is unusual. As the authors observe, it has become common recently to accommodate interest in the aesthetic character of quotidian things by arguing for an expansion of the aesthetic, for example, by claiming that the proximal senses (taste, smell, bodily sensation) are no less capable of affording aesthetic experience than the distal senses (of sight and hearing). Parsons and Carlson resist this move. It ignores Kant's distinction between aesthetic pleasure and non-aesthetic experience of the merely agreeable. Moreover, it commits aesthetics to a radical relativism of both taste and evaluation. Parsons and Carlson claim the distinction between aesthetic and bodily pleasure is phenomenologically well grounded and is respected in linguistic practice, not only in English but in Chinese and Turkish in addition. Fortunately, it is not necessary to expand the scope of aesthetic experience or to accept the subjectivism this brings in its train in order to accommodate aesthetic interest in the everyday. It is when everyday objects are approached in terms of the relation between their features and their proper function that their appearance takes on an aesthetic hue.

When it comes to the aesthetic appreciation of non-human animals, Parsons and Carlson take a strong stand. They deplore approaches that appreciate animals as exotic or symbolic, that anthropomorphize them in a kitsch way, or that consider them solely for their formal features. Indeed, they regard the human focus of such interests not only as shallow but thereby as also morally problematic. The moral issue arises because animals are moral patients that must be respected for themselves. Our aesthetic appreciation of them should recognize and depend on the

nature of the animal that is its object; in those terms, we should consider an animal's traits or characteristics in terms of their proper function of contributing to its fitness, and it is the animal's looking fit that should be the source of aesthetic pleasure. Moreover, we should be concerned with the internal relation between the animal's functionality and its beauty, rather than treating the latter as merely constrained by the former. Parsons and Carlson continue: not only does this allow us to respond aesthetically to animals in a fashion that is not morally suspect, it opens us up to varieties of beauty to which we otherwise might be blind, such as the exquisiteness with which the bat's ears and face, through their elaborate molding, suit them for their echo-location function.

When Parsons and Carlson turn their attention to art, they begin by rejecting many potential accounts of art's proper function: to provide aesthetic experience, to sustain aesthetic properties, to unite people in religious brotherhood, to provide conditions conducive to evolutionary fitness, to manifest neurosis. They also dismiss intention-based functional theories of art's proper function (203-9); there is no principle for distinguishing function-establishing intentions from intentions that lack the effect. Similarly, causal role theories, which identify art's function with its causal contribution in some wider system — for instance, its serving to maintain class differences within society — are not up to the job (209-16). Even if we specify that the relevant system is the one in which art's contribution is most important, or in which it best performs its role, these do not necessarily identify its proper function. What is wanted is a selected effects theory that pinpoints art's proper function by reference to the need it meets, which thereby leads to its manufacture, distribution, and preservation (216-22).

It turns out that no single proper function for art is clearly discernible, however. Some subcategories of art are functional — religious art and tragedy, for instance — and we may be able to identify proper functions for these and evaluate individual instances according to how well they meet their proper function. But, Parsons and Carlson intimate, much fine art is not functional in this way. Despite their concession that there is no proper function for all art, they conclude on a positive note: the notion of Functional Beauty enriches our aesthetic appreciation of much Western fine art and, besides, allows the inclusion of what have been inappropriately regarded as borderline cases — crafts and the artifacts of non-Western cultures — within the realm of the aesthetic.

Just as there can be no global judgments of beauty appealing to art's proper function, there can be none also for inorganic nature, according to Parsons and Carlson, because inorganic nature has causal but not proper functions (124-36). As a result, it cannot be malformed or dysfunctional. If a rock formation that acts to divert a river collapses, we would not say that it is malfunctioning with respect to its former causal

function; once it collapses it no longer has that function. The doctrine of Positive Aesthetics — that all nature, when properly appreciated, is always or usually aesthetically good — is false for organic nature, which may be ugly because it cannot fulfill its proper function, but is true for inorganic nature, at least to the extent that we can appreciate the contribution made by some part of inorganic nature to a wider system without finding it defective if it then ceases to realize that functional role. Moreover, this appreciation of causal function is genuinely aesthetic because, while it does not lead us to see inorganic nature as, say, streamlined or elegant, it does affect the extent to which inorganic nature appears ordered. A flooded forest looks less disharmonious when seen in the context of a lotic ecosystem because what first seems contra-standard for forests — flooding — then is seen as standard or variable.

II

1. In the remainder of this review, I turn to criticism of the theses of *Functional Beauty*. I begin with five objections that do not challenge the theory of Functional Beauty directly. The first concerns Parsons and Carlson's anti-intentionalism.

As I have described, Parsons and Carlson oppose intentionalist accounts of the proper function of human artifacts. They reject such accounts as both too broad and too narrow. They are too broad in that intentions about the functions of objects are common but only a minority of these determine its proper function, and too narrow in that makers' and designers' intentions about their creations' proper functions are defeasible.

Even if we accept the examples Parsons and Carlson offer in favor of their anti-intentionalist stance, it can be argued that their conclusions are too strong. More attention to the social context of intending, to the roles of intenders, and to how both of these affect what intentions can be realized might explain why not everyone who expresses an intention about an item's proper function can confer that function or can supersede a proper function that was established earlier. Also, correctly observing that the maker's intentions are defeasible under circumstances in which the originally intended proper function can no longer be met is not sufficient to show that those original intentions were always irrelevant. Moreover, we can accept that market endorsement is necessary to an item's proper function while also maintaining a moderate intentionalism that makes the designer's purpose no less relevant to the outcome, at least in the initial phase.

2. Parsons and Carlson allow late in the book that Functional Beauty is only one among several species of aesthetic beauty, but a more persis-

tent theme maintains that a concern with an item's Functional Beauty — that is, aesthetic judgments directed to how it fulfils its proper function — achieves an objective interpersonal status, whereas by contrast, interest in its other modes of beauty, to the extent that they are indifferent to their object's identity as the thing it is, incline to a radical relativity that undermines public discourse about aesthetic value. Aesthetic concerns that ignore an item's proper function do not count as fully kosher for Parsons and Carlson.

Parsons and Carlson's antipathy toward aesthetic subjectivism or relativity and their coupling this with the idea that appeal to an item's proper function provides the appropriate frame for an objective response that can be truly evaluated for correctness emerges, for instance, in their discussion of the aesthetics of the everyday. But it is not clear that the priority accorded by Parsons and Carlson to the objectivity of aesthetic judgments in this case is always appropriate. When it comes to aesthetic appreciation of the everyday, it may be that we value personal enjoyment and enrichment above objectivity and interpersonal agreement, and this is why, compared with the critical disciplines applied to the fine arts, there is no discipline of criticism in this area. This is not to deny that *Functional Beauty*'s concern with proper function can provide a basis for publicly grounded aesthetic judgments, but it is to emphasize that other species of beauty might answer to concerns directed to self-definition and self-development rather than to public agreement. Aesthetics can expect and tolerate a fair degree of relativism in its judgments without collapsing into normatively empty subjectivity, and it is in the aesthetic appreciation of the everyday that we should expect such relativities to come to the fore.

In any case, we need not accept that an aesthetic judgment is objective only when it is directed by consideration of its target's proper function. Not all kinds of things possess proper functions and not all things with proper functions are identified solely with respect to those functions. For such cases, an aesthetic interest in the item for what it is must involve a concern with aspects apart from its functionality, yet judgments of its aesthetic character will remain objective insofar as they consider it for what identifies it as such. Moreover, aesthetic judgments might be interpersonal and comparable, even where they disregard their target's nature, provided they are relativized to some widely shared interest in the target's (non-identifying) features or aspects.

3. There are other respects in which Parsons and Carlson's treatment of the aesthetics of the everyday can be queried, such as their defense of Kant's view that aesthetic experience is tied to the distal but not the proximal senses. I agree that not all bodily pleasures should be assimilated to the aesthetic. Purely sensuous experiences with no cognitive

component probably do not qualify. But other bodily pleasures, the appreciation of fine whisky, perhaps, can be informed by experience, knowledge of traditions and of widely accepted standards, and appreciation of makers' intentions in a fashion that plausibly elevates them to the realm of the aesthetic.

In addition, Parsons and Carlson attribute aesthetic character to everyday items only functionally, in terms of their adaptedness to their proper function. But it is not clear that all everyday things subject to aesthetic appreciation are categorized functionally; consider sunsets, for example. Moreover, to take a case not acknowledged by Parsons and Carlson, many artifactual everyday items are designed to display aesthetic properties secondarily — that is, independently of their functionality — and can be appreciated aesthetically for displaying the relevant qualities. In other words, many everyday items are both functional and beautiful, without being beautifully functional.

4. Against the claim that a concern with functionality is not aesthetic, Parsons and Carlson argue that not all our approval or disapproval depends on utility alone. We prefer a fine Swiss watch and also judge it to be more functionally beautiful than a quartz model that also keeps perfect time; we regard a car with four flat tires as less appealing and more dysfunctional than one with three, though neither car can run. This is supposed to show how functionality translates into and informs appearances that are appreciated aesthetically. But the claim that the relevant judgment is functional as well as aesthetic is surely questionable. A more plausible alternative has it that the watches function equally well, though the Swiss one is more aesthetically appealing because it achieves aesthetic effects that are secondary to and independent of its function, whereas the quartz model aims at no such secondary effects or aims at them but fulfils them less well. The judgment that the Swiss watch is aesthetically superior to the quartz model puts aside consideration of how well either fulfills the primary, time-telling function of watches in order to regard them for the aesthetic sake of their non-functional characteristics.

And even if the aesthetic judgment is functionally oriented, it might not support Parsons and Carlson's theory. We might take account of the watches' function and admire the Swiss one more because of the skill and workmanship that goes into its achieving that function. But in this case, our reaction fits Kant's account of adherent beauty rather than Parsons and Carlson's model of Functional Beauty: the function of watches constrains how they can be beautiful and favors the achievement of functionality by the exercise of skill, without the Swiss watch being more beautifully functional than the quartz one.

5. Parsons and Carlson's general commitment to the impropriety of addressing things aesthetically without regard to their proper function comes out (and is again a defect) in their account of the aesthetic response to non-human animals. As I have described, they maintain that the aesthetic appreciation of non-human animals should be in terms of the animals' evolutionary fitness. Other, anthropomorphically biased approaches involve 'relating to them in a shallow, and hence morally inappropriate, manner' (116).

I agree that animals can be a source of Functional Beauty in the fashion Parsons and Carlson describe — that is, we can take aesthetic pleasure in an animal's looking fit for its biological kind — but I think alternative approaches to animal beauty are not inappropriate or immoral in the way that is suggested.

Of course, an unreflective response to the beauty of an animal's appearance can always be supplemented with other types of aesthetic reaction, including the functionally oriented. Yet even if this does not occur, that the reaction is undeniably partial does not show, as Parsons and Carlson apparently assume, that it must therefore be superficial or shallow. Consider our interest in human physical beauty. According to evolutionary psychologists, beauty correlates with features such as symmetry, which is an honest indicator of fitness because it signals immunity from disease, a history of good health, and the like. Yet an interest in beauty is not utilitarian; it is rarely narrowly sexual, nor does it come into play only where mate selection is at issue. Rather, as with food, sleep, exercise, and the attractiveness of babies, nature wisely leads us to attach intrinsic value to what is evolutionarily useful for us. So the judgment of physical beauty, and indeed the aesthetic stance more generally, is a pervasive mode of engagement with the world; it is of far-reaching social and cultural significance. In Bali, for example, where the gods value physical beauty and humans dress to display it in making daily ritual offerings, the concern with physical beauty is integral to ways of behaving that give expression to the culture's deepest religious values.

Even if we accept for the sake of the discussion that a focus only on an animal's unfamiliar, formal, symbolic, or human-like features is not only partial but also shallow, there is no warrant for the assumption that the response is thereby morally suspect. Admittedly, it would be so if we made decisions affecting the animals solely on this inappropriate basis, for example, by deciding to exterminate ugly-looking species. But so long as we respect the animals as individuals and as members of their species (whatever doing so might require), there need be nothing untoward in pursuing and enjoying an aesthetic response that is shallow. It is true that empirical studies show we are inclined to be unconsciously biased in favor of people we find physically beautiful under

conditions in which this is not appropriate. That is why, for example, musicians are screened from the judges' gaze when they are auditioned for orchestral membership. But the risk of a similar unconscious bias in favor of 'pretty' or 'cute' or against 'ugly' animals recommends that we should guard against its intrusion where that could lead us to act or judge wrongly, not that we should condemn out of hand an aesthetic interest in the animal that does not go beyond its outward appearance. And when it comes to our preferences for animals, there may be nothing wrong in exploiting such biases where they occur, as when funding given for the protection of charismatic species is used to support the ecosystems they share with many other kinds of species and organisms.

Finally, it is mistaken to insist that the anthropocentric standpoint is inappropriate to the proper aesthetic appreciation of animals. After all, we are considering *our* responses to and judgments about *them* — not one lion's aesthetic judgments about another, if lions make such judgments — and it is reasonable to expect our judgments to connect to our interests as well as to theirs. Indeed, if it is part of our deepest human nature to view animals aesthetically, this will go back to relations holding between them and our ancient forebears, back to their roles in our ancestors' lives as food, companions, helpers, vermin, predators, and so on.

As a response to such observations, it is sometimes claimed that our forebears lived under very different circumstances and had very different beliefs from ours, and that human nature (if we admit its existence at all) includes inclinations — toward racism, for example — that we now rightly regard as immoral; morality is not enshrined in human nature and enjoins and requires that we transcend that nature. In this vein, Parsons and Carlson claim that the burden of proof lies with those who would defend an attitude to animals that (according to Parsons and Carlson) is morally problematic. They are too quick to do so. Instead of regarding ethics as a kind of superego arising culturally and thereby separately from a crude biological human nature conceived as the selfish id, it is more plausible to see our ethical behaviors and values as products of our evolution, not as opposed to it. And as one might predict, the empirical data do not support the view that humans are inherently racist or the hypothesis that xenophobia was adaptive given the conditions under which our ancestors lived.[8] In that case, the

8 See Gillian Brock and Quentin D. Atkinson, 'What Can Examining the Psychology of Nationalism Tell Us about Our Prospects of Aiming at the Cosmopolitan Vision?' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* **11** (2008) 165-79.

burden of proof lies rather with Parsons and Carlson, who condemn as immoral an aesthetic interest that is partial or shallow in considering only the beauty or ugliness of the animal's outward appearance. There is no doubt that animals can be and often are wronged by humans, but I suspect that no direct connection can be made between that fact and our adoption of an aesthetic attitude to an animal's appearance without regard to how that appearance displays the animal's fitness.

III

1. I turn now to direct criticisms of the account of Functional Beauty developed by Parsons and Carlson, beginning with their reliance on an argument produced by Kendall L. Walton as they respond to the Problem of Translation, which is the worry that it is not easy to see how awareness of an item's function could affect its perceptible aesthetic qualities.

Parsons and Carlson's adaptation of Walton's argument requires careful scrutiny. Walton identifies properties as standard, variable, or contra-standard with respect to category membership, whereas they characterize properties in these terms with respect to a thing's function. Items that are categorized according to their proper function — shovels, for instance — should survive this transformation, which may be why Parsons and Carlson sometimes fudge their shift in usage by writing about what is standard, variable, or contra-standard not for functions alone but for functional categories. But what of things whose category membership is not tied to their function? Take art. It has functions (including the function in some cases of being contemplated for its own sake), but it is far from clear that art is to be defined in terms of the conjunction of these functions or that it has an overarching, distinctive proper function. In that case, it is equally unclear how we should set about distinguishing what is standard or variable with respect to art's function(s), because its functions differ and none can claim priority as the source of art's identity as such. It is precisely under such conditions that the Problem of Translation comes up. So it is difficult to shake off the suspicion that Parsons and Carlson's version of the argument helps them deal with the Problem of Translation only for functions that are category defining, and not, as they imply, for functions more broadly.

There is perhaps another reason for thinking that Walton's argument does not work for functions as it does for categories. Walton denies that a work's standard properties are aesthetically inert; they can contribute to the sense of order, inevitability, stability, or correctness that we experience in it. In other words, when the properties in question are not innocuous because they are standard across many categories,

awareness of them can help orient us appropriately about what to expect of the work. Nevertheless, the aesthetic interest of a given kind of item depends mainly on its variable properties, especially as regards its representational content and expressive character. 'In general, then, what we regard a work as resembling, and as representing, depends on the properties of the work that are variable, and not on those which are standard for us.'[9] Meanwhile, contra-standard properties can be so obtrusive that they block an appropriate response. 'We are likely to find such features shocking, or disconcerting, or startling, or upsetting.'[10] By contrast, Parsons and Carlson seem to assign more aesthetic importance to standard and contra-standard properties than to variable ones. Moreover, they are vague about where the distinction between standard and variable properties falls with respect to function. Sometimes they write of standard properties as those *essential* for achieving the function and of variable ones, alternatively, as those that would *contribute* to the function should they be chosen, which marks a departure from Walton's use in which standard properties are those common to all members of the category that lack contra-standard features and variable ones have no direct connection with category membership.

If these criticisms bite, they imply that the notion of Functional Beauty is central only with items categorized according to their proper function, and as a result, the theory developed here is not as widely applicable as the authors imply. As it turns out, Parsons and Carlson admit limits to the usefulness of Functional Beauty in aesthetically judging both inorganic nature and art. And reflection shows these difficulties come up because neither inorganic nature nor works of art have proper functions.

2. Aesthetic judgments of inorganic nature cannot appeal to its proper functions since it has none. In consequence, inorganic nature cannot be malformed or dysfunctional. Nevertheless, the causal function of bits of inorganic nature can warrant genuinely aesthetic appreciation by affecting the extent to which they appear ordered. For example, in an ecosystem recognized as lotic, flooding will be seen not as contra-standard but as standard or variable.

I am not sure that I am convinced by this argument for the aesthetic character of the experience of inorganic nature. Where the functions in questions are merely causal and descriptive, they do not define functional categories and there is no such thing as appearing fit for a func-

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9 Walton, 'Categories of Art,' 346

10 Walton, 'Categories of Art,' 352

tion. And there is neither the elegance that goes with displaying only standard functional properties nor the aesthetic interest and tension of seeming to possess contra-standard properties. In other words, none of Parsons and Carlson's three relations between aesthetic character and function seem to apply to inorganic nature. Whatever modes of aesthetic beauty are displayed in inorganic nature, it is not clear that appeal to causal functions can fill the gap left by the absence of proper functions.

Art also lacks a proper function, Parsons and Carlson concede. Some subcategories of art, such as comedy, are functional, and we may be able to identify proper functions for these and evaluate individual instances according to how well they meet their proper function, but much fine art is not functional.

Parsons and Carlson might have made their case stronger had they held that all art is functional, with some art having the proper function of being contemplated for its own sake alone.[11] This approach demonstrates that judgments of Functional Beauty apply to all artworks, not solely to some sub-classes, but it does not help with the problem that arises from the plurality of art's functions, which is that there can be no overarching account of art's Functional Beauty if there is no single proper function common to all artworks. In other words, there can be no correct identification of features as standard, variable, or contra-standard with respect to art's functionality, given that art has many functions none of which takes priority when it comes to identifying art as such.

IV

1. Because the notion of Functional Beauty, as arising from the fashion in which an item realizes its proper function, applies directly neither to art in general nor to inorganic nature, the theory presented in this book is not entirely unified or comprehensive, though I allow that adding Functional Beauty to the mix makes aesthetic theory more unified and comprehensive than it was formerly. So, I think Parsons and Carlson go too far when they claim at the book's close that 'rather than being just one further, and possibly marginal, element in the aesthetic character of functional things, Functional Beauty may occupy a central and primary place in all our aesthetic experience' (234). As I indicated in discussing the aesthetic appreciation of animals and of the everyday, I am a pluralist about modes of aesthetic appreciation. I am not inclined

11 This is the position I defend in 'Aesthetic Judgment, Artworks and Functional Beauty.'

to agree that the beauty of functionality should always be regarded as more correct, of higher priority, or, for animals, as more morally proper. When aesthetic appreciation seeks to understand its object as it is, and where that object belongs to a functional category, its Functional Beauty should be of leading concern, but not all legitimate aesthetic experience aims at such understanding or at the interpersonally valid judgments that would rest on it, and not all objects of aesthetic appreciation are categorized in terms of their proper function. Yet despite these caveats, I think Parsons and Carlson are entirely correct to identify the neglect of Functional Beauty as a serious lacuna in contemporary aesthetic theorizing, and correct also to see the concern with Functional Beauty as ranging widely across art, artifacts, and biological organisms. Their book provides important resources for the enrichment of philosophical aesthetics.

While I think they over-exaggerate its scope, Parsons and Carlson are too modest, I think, in praising the significance of their thesis. The focus on Functional Beauty points a way to acknowledge the relevance to philosophical aesthetics of the empirical study of art. This is of no small import, given the dominance until recently of a neo-Kantian paradigm that attempted to insulate the philosophy of art and aesthetics from empirical investigation.

Kant's characterization of aesthetic judgment as not governed by concepts, coupled with his idea that, though they are objective and hence should be universal, such judgments are not rule-governed, removed art from the ordinary world and the modes of explanation appropriate to it. Because art is unprincipled, it cannot be amenable to empirical study; art can yield its secrets only to a priori speculation and, to the extent that not even philosophy can reveal all, it inevitably remains somewhat mysterious and ineffable.

Such doctrines suited the tenets of Romanticism, but persisted well beyond that movement. Consider the hostility displayed toward the scientific investigation of art and aesthetic experience in the following:

> People often say that aesthetics is a branch of psychology. The idea is that once we are more advanced, everything — all the mysteries of Art — will be understood by psychological experiments. Exceedingly stupid as the idea is, this is roughly it. Aesthetic questions have nothing to do with psychological experiment, but are answered in an entirely different way. ... People still have the idea that psychology is one day going to explain all our aesthetic judgements, and they mean experimental psychology. This is very funny — very funny indeed. There doesn't seem any connection between what psychologists do and any judgement about a work of art.[12]

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12 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and*

The Kantian legacy that dominated aesthetics into the twentieth century treated the appreciation of art and other aesthetic phenomena as not amenable to empirical study, that is, as existing in their own autonomous realm. Aesthetics became a topic in fanciful philosophy. As armchair speculation became less respectable in philosophy more widely, aesthetics became increasingly marginalized as a result. Yet if Functional Beauty is frequently relevant to aesthetic experience, the neo-Kantian model must be rejected. The natural sciences, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, anthropology, and like disciplines provide frames in terms of which the proper functions of the many items that have them can be analyzed, so that their Functional Beauty can be revealed, understood, and appreciated. *Functional Beauty* illustrates and advocates an approach to philosophical aesthetics that fruitfully draws on and is informed by the data of empirical disciplines. That direction represents a significant reorientation within aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

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Relgious Belief, C. Barrett, ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1978), at 17 & 19. Wittgenstein's main point was that underlying causal mechanisms do not explain or justify aesthetic judgments. And to be fair, the dominant paradigms in psychology in the late 1930s, when Wittgenstein was speaking, were less appealing and relevant than those of today.