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A First Look at Lookism by Ryan Nichols

You give preference to attractive people. Whether grading papers, hiring employees, writing performance evaluations, or negotiating contracts, when you have physical or visual interaction with others, evidence overwhelmingly indicates that you will bias your behavior to favor the beautiful.

Let's say that 'lookism' refers to a pattern of morally inappropriate discrimination based on the degree to which others approximate, or fail to approximate, standards of beauty. The more beautiful the individual, the more likely he or she will receive unjustified positive discrimination. The more ugly, the more likely he or she will receive unfair treatment.

Lookism is as real as racism and sexism, the more familiar pair of patterns of morally inappropriate discrimination. True, the effects of lookism are not as clearly appalling. Lookism lacks the history—moral, legislative and cultural history—of racism and sexism. But lookism calls to mind many of the conceptual and ethical issues familiar from them. In this essay I intend to explore several of those connections and, by doing so, reflect on the moral status of lookism. I place an emphasis on raising—not answering—questions through reflection on literary science fiction.

Section 1

Ted Chaing stories remind me of Darko Suvin's characterization of the genre of science fiction literature as the literature of cognitive estrangement. Chaing didn't introduce me to the theoretical exploration of 'lookism'. I don't know if Chaing coined the term, but my first introduction to the term occurred reading Chaing's 'Liking What You See: A Documentary.' This story, which I highly recommend to listeners of *The Sci Phi Show*, serves as the springboard for the following discussion.

'Liking What You See' is a non-standard piece of science fiction piece. Chaing provides the reader with little description or setting. The characters are identified by long quotations that function like speeches. But, as with some stories by Greg Egan, the lean toward didacticism can be overlooked—even relished—by admiring the unbridled conceptual creativity of the author. Chaing probes the psychological, personal, social and economic consequences of a technology called 'calliagnosia'. This neologism combines two Greek terms, kallos (beauty) and

gnosis (knowledge), which, with the alpha-privative, becomes 'agnosis,' or the absence of knowledge. The aim of a callignosis implant is to prevent its wearer from finding some faces any more beautiful than other faces.

The central event in the story is the referendum by fictional Pembleton College to require the use of 'calli', as its called, for all its students. This social experiment is described from the perspective of students, neurologists, parents, administrators, and sundry campaigners for and against. At each step in the implementation of the controversial referendum, characters struggle to cope with the effects of calli, good and bad.

A stunningly attractive sorority girl has the justified belief that society values her looks; her belief that she is extremely beautiful mirrors this fact. But if others around her all wear calli, they will not appreciate this, which alters her social identity. After a period of resentment, some of the beautiful inhabiting a calli-world come to the painful realization that people did not enjoy their company for reasons having to do with their personality, conversation or intelligence. On a trip home from Thanksgiving, the sorority girl may find that even her father, who has adopted calli, treats her differently.

On the other hand, the ugly person who meets a calli-user has a reprieve from the pervasive self-monitoring that he has known his whole life. He has no need to worry that people are looking at his double chin, his missing tooth, or his moles. It appears to him that when he converses with a calli-wearer, for the first time in his life they listen to what he says without a condescending preoccupation with his asymmetrical facial features.

Section 2

Imagine for a moment a world with calli. How might it differ from ours? Seems to me that the consequences would have an unimaginable scope. The study of electoral politics reveals correlations between the physical attractiveness of the candidate and his or her polling numbers. If you could not base your judgment of a politician running for office on his or her appearance, then the decision-making about your vote would presumably be based on other issues. But universal calli wouldn't imply that decisions about others, especially politicians, would have more to do with the candidate's suitability for the office and the ways in which he or she maps your own preferences. Would it?

Perhaps we would select other physical features of candidates on which to focus. Wardrobe choices or tones of voice might become more important if we aren't able to individuate the candidates' faces. But if politics were altered by candidates using calli, what would happen once they took it off after winning elections? If only some of the world used calli, would an ugly congressman be as capable of getting things for his constituency as would an attractive congressman? This would be an ironic twist. Suppose the halo effect is so pronounced that a physically attractive but moderately qualified candidate in a primary election will be better able to raise money and win the election due to the fact that she is regarded as beautiful. Don't kid yourself by thinking that even one in ten of the votes cast by men for Dennis Kucinich were not cast because his wife is smoking hot (as Stephen Colbert reminds us). How much would even his polling numbers drop with calli?

Suppose the physically attractive but moderately qualified congresswoman will have more ability to pass legislation benefiting her constituency than would a physically unattractive but highly qualified congresswoman. Is it then more rational—'rational' in the sense in which rationality is proportional to preference-

maximizing—to repeat, is it more rational for a constituent to vote for the beautiful but merely moderately qualified candidate? The fact that the pretty congresswoman gets more done is consequent upon lookism in the first place. The previous few paragraphs are musings on just one small corner of the debate about calli and its implications on public policy. Countless fascinating questions remain, some of which are factual: Suppose you are a student at Pembleton. Would you vote for it? Why or why not? How much would it matter if you were ugly? Or beautiful? Or an administrator? Others are moral: Should we adopt calli? Should governments simply impose calli upon their citizens? Before you say ‘no, that’s absurd’, think about whether your justification for your negative answer could be reapplied to yield a negative answer to parallel questions about the governments involvement in bringing equal rights to women and minorities. Careful here. Let’s clarify. When I’m referring to the government’s ‘imposition’ of calli, I’m referring to a mandate by the EEOC—the U.S. government’s Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The EEOC’s Executive Order 11246, signed by President Johnson, specifies that a number of facts about job applicants cannot be used against their candidacy. Specifically, 11246 forbids employers from discriminating candidates on the basis of a candidate’s race, sex, creed, religion, color, or national origin. We can still discriminate on the basis of how attractive are job candidates, though. In virtue of what facts is lookism treated as morally permissible and racism is treated as morally impermissible?

Section 3

Our behavior is frequently immoral. Science fiction has taught us just how absurd some of our biases are.

Recall a Star Trek: Old and Campy episode that dealt with white/black racism. (Note to Trekkers: this is episode #70, titled ‘Let that be your last battlefield.’) (Wait, you knew that already.) The Enterprise finds itself in the midst of a conflict between two groups—one whose members are white on their left and black on their right and another whose members are white on their right and black on their left. A colorblind form of calli would have prevented wars between these two people groups.

Suppose that about 1/7th of human beings have been born on Tuesday and suppose Tuesers receive inferior education, if they receive any at all. They are barred from public jobs. Most normals in positions of authority will not hire them in public or private businesses, etc. Tuesers have the same mental capacities as the rest of us, and they experience pain in the same way that we all do.

Move away from the possible worlds now and think about where you live. Let me adapt an ingenious question from my friend Derek Matravers. Suppose you are signing up for a popular on-line dating service. As you scroll through the registration process you are confronted with box asking you for your racial preferences. With the click of a button you can instruct the Eharmony server not to send you any potential matches who are Hispanic, African-American, Indian, White, Native American, etc. I suppose that in the future Dr. Neil Clark Warren will offer clickable color icons in order to offer its customers refined choices about skin tone on the color spectrum. (Having said that, Eharmony has been sued out here in the LA Superior Court on the grounds that it practices unjustified discrimination by not offering the opportunity for customers to find same-sex matches.)

So...what did you click? If you selected not to receive matches from people of certain races and ethnicities, were you discriminating against them in a way that

is immoral? If you selected not to receive matches from people of certain races and ethnicities, why did you do it? Did you efficiently deceive yourself that the 'culture gap' between you and someone from that race would be too great to bridge?

Section 4

I remember as a sophomore taking a 300 level philosophy of religion course with a white, male professor—Dr. Koehn was his name. We wrote two research papers for the course. An attractive, skirt-wearing, cleavage-bearing student was evidently given a high C on one of her papers. I received an A-. The reason I know that she was first given a high C was because, as was Dr. Koehn's way, we could approach him after he graded our assignments if we thought the grades were unjustified. She had done so. At the following class meeting he announced to the class that he had never so radically changed a student's grade on a research paper as he had this time, but that he was now giving her an A.

Dr. Koehn was a lookist. So am I. If made aware of the vast problem of lookism, would people voluntarily choose to take steps to overcome their own lookist behavior?

From personal experience, I can say that some people would. Countless studies have shown that the grade received by students is affected by the attractiveness of the student. Grading bias is found across all gender configurations (male teacher grading female students; female teacher grading female students;...). I don't know when it begins since the studies I have seen were of university-age students. I'm frightened to think that it might begin at four or five, in kindergarten.

In response to this bias, teachers at many levels have chosen to grade anonymously through a variety of techniques. Perhaps, unbeknownst to me, departments or colleges have policy papers advocating widespread use of anonymous grading techniques. But there are countless Dr. Koehn's out there. Perhaps their colleges and universities can impose upon them in order that they grade fairly and anonymously whenever the nature of assignments permit it.

Section 5: The Argument

Let's nail this diffuse conversation down with an argument. I don't pretend to endorse this argument, but it and the issues it raises are really fun and challenging to think about. Here it is, in three premises and a conclusion:

Premise 1: Racism and sexism are ideologies, with accompanying patterns of discriminatory behavior, that promote unjust treatment of people solely on the basis of membership (or the lack thereof) in groups based on race and gender.

For each normative ethical theory, we receive a distinct explanation of the wrongness of racism and sexism. Some might argue that to discriminate on the basis of race is to fail to treat others as ends in themselves. Others will argue that racism and sexism are violations of equal treatment and breeches of the social contract.

A pervasive feature of accounts of the wrongness of racism and sexism is the invocation of the concept of relevancy. If a software developer is hiring for someone to write C++ and Java, then the color of their skin is irrelevant to determining whether their skill set maps the job description. If the firm does not

hire a black person on the grounds that he is black, then the firm's hiring decision is unjustified. Likewise, the situation is similar in the case in which the person not hired is not hired because he is ugly.

Premise 2: Lookism is an ideology, with accompanying patterns of discriminatory behavior, that promotes unjust treatment of people solely on the basis of membership (or the lack thereof) in groups based on being attractive.

Lookism differs from racism and sexism in part for the surprising reason that lookism is much more widespread than are racism and sexism. Lookism affects people deemed ugly within every race. As a result of the fact that there is no public outcry about lookism, its status as a vice is stealthy and its subtle presence is often difficult to identify. Arguably, the effects of lookism at any time in its history have never been as terrifying and grave as have the effects of racism and sexism. However, some extreme forms of lookism have reached the public eye. For example, cases of severe facial disfigurement, as seen in The Elephant Man, historically, throughout countless cultures, have prompted the privileged to act out upon lookist assumptions. In limiting cases, the ugly have been treated as inhuman and made the object of circus performances. Lookism and racism share a tragic common history of putting certain people on display in human zoos. For example, P.T. Barnum 'displayed' Joice Heth, an African American slave, in his traveling exhibition in 1836. This is reminiscent of the 19th century English 'freak shows' in which individuals with physical 'deformities' awed crowds with their perceived ugliness.

Lookism historically led to many forms of radically immoral treatment, including these. But much more important for the present day, lookism is a form of discrimination. Perhaps most prominent are forms of workplace discrimination against people who are perceived as unattractive. As I am using the term, to be unattractive means to have physical characteristics perceived by the majority of the local population as undesirable and ugly. Facially, having asymmetrical features is a sound predictor of judgments of ugliness. Though this is perhaps the most common source of lookist judgments, there are countless others, including weight, shabby or unfashionable clothing, height, discoloration of the skin, burns, warts, and so on. Many of these and other characteristics that predict lookist judgments are gender-specific. Women with a waist to hips ratio greater than 1 will be regarded as ugly, as (often) will men whose head hair has faded out.

In addition, as has been discussed by Derek Matravers while out here at Cal State Fullerton, one of the primary means through which lookism enters our daily lives regards sexual preference. Members of all races and genders generally have sexual preferences for those regarded as pretty and lack sexual preferences for those regarded as ugly. If it is immoral not to find someone attractive due to his or her race, then it is immoral not to find someone attractive due to his or her physical appearance. So

Premise 3: If racism and sexism are morally wrong, then lookism is also morally wrong.

Conclusion: So, lookism is morally wrong.

I'm not—not yet, at least—advocating this argument. I'm still mulling it over. But

feel free to write me to let me know where I've gone wrong.

Section 6: First Objection

Before I conclude, I want to critically discuss this argument.

One might object that lookism has a different moral status than racism and sexism and, on that ground, reject premise two. Eye-tracking studies of infants reveal that they have an innate disposition to stare longer at symmetrical faces than they do at asymmetrical faces. Facial symmetry is a key predictor of beauty. From infancy on, we have an innate disposition to prefer looking at beautiful people. As a result, people across cultures and races and genders are hard-wired to be lookists.

One might respond to this criticism of premise two by arguing that there may be many behaviors that we are disposed to, and yet many of those may clearly be immoral. For example, some individuals may be disposed to violence or rape. But to say that those individuals are not responsible for their actions is repugnant. In the biz, philosophers talk about 'ought implies can' principles. This refers to the fact that I do not have a moral obligation to X if it is not possible for me to X. I can't put out the Southern California wildfires because I simply lack that ability. As a result, I am not morally obligated to put them out. The present objection to premise two appeals tacitly to an 'ought implies can' principle that reads, in effect, 'Since I cannot refrain from lookist tendencies, then I am not obligated to not be a lookist.' But, despite predispositions in my animal nature to be a lookist, it does not follow that I am unable to refrain from lookist tendencies. To refrain from subtle acts of discrimination on the basis of looks may require great effort, consciousness-raising and, perhaps, even therapy, but clearly it can be done.

Section 7: Second Objection

Here is a second objection, again directed at premise two. Lookism is morally permissible in certain contexts, just as is discrimination on the basis of race and sex. Suppose I'm a casting director who is hired on to fill roles for a biopic of Eleonore Roosevelt. I hold an open call and 30 people come to the study for auditions. A handful of men and a handful of non-white women turn up. I send them away without allowing them to audition because I only want to cast a white woman in the role. But they cry foul and accuse me of sexism and racism. But that is itself unjustified. My goal is to cast a white woman in the role in case Eleonore Roosevelt was a white woman. I am explicitly discriminating on the grounds on the basis of race and sex when I make this hire, but that is morally permissible in this case. The present objection uses this example to illustrate that, in this and other cases, discrimination on the basis of race and sex is morally permissible, then discrimination on the basis of looks is, in certain cases, also morally permissible.

Earlier we described the wrongness of racism and sexism in terms of the irrelevancy of race and sex to decision-making. But, continues this objection, one's looks are frequently relevant to decision-making. Examples abound. If I am a studio exec, then I want my casting directors to find the most beautiful people possible for dramatic roles because I want to maximize profit. To maximize profit, the most number of people possible need to watch my show. I could have cast either Tom Cruise or someone with severe elephantiasis in *Minority Report*. But being handsome is clearly relevant to my goal of maximizing profits. Someone with elephantiasis would hinder me selling tickets.

One reply to this objection goes as follows. Feature films in the 50's contained almost no people of color. The studios could have given just the same justification for that practice as appeared in the previous paragraph. Selling tickets is the aim; white people did it well in the 50's, and people of color didn't. But, one might argue, the studios had moral obligations to cast people of color in roles in the 50's just as they do now. So, the lookism of the studios at that time was indeed immoral, contrary to the thrust of the present objection.

But does the same sort of point hold today regarding the studios' lack of interest in casting ugly people? This objection calls for critical reflection about the scope of the immorality of lookism. The objection may point to a disanalogy between lookism and the pair of racism and sexism. Consider these statements:

5 The federal department of transportation does not hire unattractive people because those people are unattractive.

6 Studios do not cast unattractive people in major roles because those people are unattractive.

7 I don't date unattractive people because those people are unattractive.

(5) describes a practice that is clearly morally wrong, and its wrongness can be explained as we have explained the wrongness of lookism. But of the following two statements, (6) and (7) I am unconvinced that they describe practices that are morally wrong. At minimum consider this: if it is morally wrong for studios to refrain from hiring ugly people in major roles and if it is wrong for me to refrain from dating ugly women, then the wrongness of those practices cannot be explained in the same way as can the wrongness in the first case, in statement (5). This is for at least two reasons.

First, we invoke a public/private divide here. The DOT is, in effect, owned by the taxpaying public. As a federal agency dedicated to the public good, they are morally unable to spend their resources in ways that would be morally permissible for private citizens. Second, recall that our characterization of the wrongness of racism and sexism identified the irrelevancy of traits such as race and gender. This was the purpose of the computer programmer example: race does not bear on one's aptitude with C++. However, it is in the studios' best interests to cast someone beautiful for a major role since this will be much better for their box office revenue than the alternative. Likewise, a woman's looks are relevant to whether I want to date the woman. I have reason to think that it is clearly in my prudential interests to date someone attractive since that will increase my happiness. Correlations between the 'ideal' waist-to-hips ratio of 0.7 (or lower) and health and fertility are well-documented. (By saying that the waist-to-hips ratio is 0.7 I mean that the circumference of the waist is 70% of the circumference of the hips.) In fact, there is a mild correlation between the 0.7 ratio and intelligence. This is because fetuses benefit from mothers with wide hips and trim waists. Hip fat that contains polyunsaturated fatty acids critical for the development of the fetus's brain. Mothers then pass on that trait to their offspring.

This discussion seems to push back the debate. It may now appear that it is immoral for me to have the preferences for dating beautiful women that I have. Is the means/end reasoning on the part of the studio immoral? Does it matter that, were they to begin casting the ugly in leading roles, they would probably go

bankrupt? Likewise, should I date an ugly women in an attempt to fulfill my moral duty? Arguably that would be worse for the woman than not dating her at all.

From this point forward the waters darken and I have—as yet—little to say with any confidence. If you have discovered where it is that I have gone wrong, I invite you to email me your comment. (I can be reached at rnichols@fullerton.edu.) I look forward to reading it. And I thank you for listening.

Bibliography

I've got no bibliography for this piece, but I have a few recommended readings for the SF fans—well, SF fans who read. The world that Kurt Vonnegut conjures up in his deservedly famous 'Harrison Bergeron' requires ballerinas to wear weights and beautiful people have cosmetic surgery.

The technology that gives Chaing's story legs—callagnosia—has effects that closely resemble Philip K. Dick's 'scramble suits', which appear in the frantic, drug-induced Orange County of A Scanner Darkly. Though the effects are very similar, scramble suits have a much different aim than does calli.

Author Peter Carey takes a similar interest in discrimination based upon looks down a very different narrative path. In his remarkable and highly recommended 'The Chance', Lumpy, a human who has been modified for the worse, falls in love with Carla, a beautiful young woman who has never undergone a body-switching procedure, i.e. never taken a 'chance'. Their relationship develops under duress as Carla becomes increasingly convinced that she ought to take a 'chance' in order to exchange her present body for an ugly one. Perhaps this is to determine whether and how Lumpy loves her; perhaps it is because she feels a moral obligation of some sort to do so; or perhaps she has been unduly and inappropriately influenced by members of a group, the Hup, that she has joined. The Hup aim to question society's fixation upon certain bodily forms, especially the bodies of women. The Hup's primary route to achieve its awareness-raising ends is encouraging members to undergo radical surgical procedures that render their bodies 'ugly'. All in all, this is a fascinating alt-feminist look at body images in the future and the moral crisis we may yet face.

See the famous online Locus Index to track down bibliographical data for all these stories. (<http://www.locusmag.com/index/0start.html>)

One final note: I'm organizing a conference entitled, "Science Fiction, Philosophy and Human Nature," which will be held March 27-28, 2008 here in Orange County. If you are interested in getting the program or in attending, drop me a line. All will be welcome at the event. It is free of charge. I dearly want Jason to join us and podcast the whole thing. If you would like to hear these sessions on The Sci-Phi Show, consider making an extra donation this month!

Yours truly,
Ryan