

The Fate of the Ugly Duckling (Beauty part 1)

Social Issues briefing #041, 13/5/2005.

'all i want to be is beautiful', writes a university-aged female blogger; and in our society, who would want anything else?

Journalist Malcolm Gladwell recently carried out a survey on about half of the CEOs of U.S. Fortune 500 companies. He found that the average CEO is about three inches taller than the average American man – who stands 5 foot nine. In addition, 30 per cent of the CEOs are at least 6 foot 2; the corresponding percentage for American adult men overall is only 3.9 per cent.

A study by economists Daniel Hamermesh and Jeff Biddle also found that there was a “plainness penalty” and a “beauty premium” – with a person with below-average looks tending to earn nine per cent less per hour, and an above-average person tending to earn five per cent more per hour.

In an article looking at the link between wages and physical appearance, authors Kristie Engemann and Michael Owyang write that:

In general, workers expect their employment outcomes, especially wages and promotions, to depend on factors related to productivity, such as education, tenure and experience. However, this type of anecdotal evidence about the heights of CEOs suggests that employment outcomes are influenced by more than just productivity.

Researchers at the University of Alberta, Canada have made a startling assertion – parents take better care of pretty children than they do ugly ones. The Canadian researchers observed how parents treated their children during a trip to the supermarket, and found that physical attractiveness made a big difference. Less attractive kiddies were more often allowed to engage in potentially dangerous activities – such as standing up in a shopping cart or wandering off, whereas good-looking children, particularly boys, got more attention from their parents and were kept closer at hand.

When it came to buckling up, pretty and ugly children were treated in starkly different ways, with seatbelt use increasing in direct proportion to attractiveness. When a woman was in charge, four per cent of the homeliest children were strapped in, compared with 13.3 per cent of the most attractive children. The difference was even more acute when fathers led the shopping expedition. In those cases, none of the least attractive children were secured with seatbelts, while 12.5 per cent of the prettiest children were.

Do we have any grounds from which to be different? That is, in modern Western society, is there any reason to find a moral problem in the preferential treatment of the beautiful? It seems hard to find one. Indeed, turning to the creation myth of our time, Dr Andrew Harrel (leader of the research team) put the findings in evolutionary terms: pretty children represent a premium genetic legacy, so they get top care.

“Like lots of animals, we tend to parcel out our resources on the basis of value. Maybe we can’t always articulate that, but in fact we do it. There are a lot of things that make a person more valuable, and physical attractiveness may be one of them.”

Although Harrell has tried to point to valuable aspects of each human other than their beauty, his attempt still leaves us with some people as “more valuable” than others. In this neo-Darwinist, post-Christian mindset, each of us brings to the table certain evolutionary advantages: brainpower, muscular strength, physical agility—and beauty, which can powerfully affect the responses of others toward us.

Is there any reason, then, not to prefer the beautiful? Not on this view. The modern creation myth is a perfect match for a society that is increasingly becoming convinced that one’s place in society rests upon what merits one can bring to it.

Yet we still feel some unease with the results of these studies. It remains slightly disturbing to think that handsome boys have more parental attention than ugly girls, or that tall CEO's are more likely to get jobs than dumpy ones of good character and ability.

Can we give any reason for our disturbance? Or should we just resign ourselves to the fact that the beautiful have more reason to live? Should we simply accept the consequence of this view: that the disabled, the deformed, the ugly and the damaged have little claim upon our affections?

It is hard to find modern ways to defend the worth of such people. Liberal thinkers resort to something called 'universal human rights' to defend them. This notion is helpful if it serves as some sort of bulwark against their destruction. But it is hard to know where these 'rights' actually come from, other than as an inarticulate cry that 'all people matter even if we don't know why'. And if, at the end of the day, people simply respond to beautiful CEOs and boys and co-workers, then talk of universal rights is just so much whistling in the wind. Evolution, it seems, is against them.

The Christian good news or 'gospel' is the only coherent way to rescue humanity from the darkness of its evolutionary creation myth, and from our seemingly 'natural' tendency to gravitate toward the beautiful. It begins with good news: that all are made in the image of God [Gen. 1:27]. Whatever aspect of God we are an 'image' of—and biblical scholars do argue about that—this statement is nonetheless good news. All people share something that is true for all of us, whatever we look like.

The good news continues that "the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" [1 Sam 16:7]. Early Jewish thought was guided, from very early on, in noticing an 'inner' person (symbolized by 'the heart') which can be very different from what a first glance at the outer person might suggest. Armed with this crucial knowledge, Jewish (and then Christian) thought knew how to treat people as more than just their appearance.

The good news is fulfilled in the appearance of one who was perfect in every respect, and who showed what it is to be a true human. But although there are no physical descriptions of Jesus Christ, some wonder if the ancient prophecy concerning him—"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2)—hints at his being very ordinary to look at. Even if he wasn't, there is no doubt that his wretched death on a cross turned him into a thing of repulsive ugliness. Yet in this moment, God saved the world. The broken, ugly and despised need fear no longer that physical appearance is central. The beautiful God became plain and lowly, even to taking his own judgment upon himself, to forgive we who are all morally ugly.

In a way entirely unanticipated by human thought, then, God overturns the primacy of beauty and makes social space for all. So the good news is completed in the way Christian people begin to rethink their social responses to each other:

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? [James 2:1-4]

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. [1 Peter 3:3-4]

The God who looks to the 'heart', who makes people in his image, who appears and saves in the ordinary brokenness of Christ, frees his people to love beyond looks. Churches spring up where all are welcome and loved, and where passions toward beauty are held in check. This radical

revision of what once seemed obvious about beauty eventually rubs off on the various societies of planet earth, and became transmuted into a secular notion called ‘universal human rights’. This society now finds it hard to remember why beauty-preference makes it uneasy, but like an ancient race-memory, the Christian gospel keeps calling. It might be time to listen and respond before ordinary looking girls and boys, disabled children, and homely colleagues are really hurt.

But we’re going to leave this briefing on a cliff-hanger for Christians. We are freed from favouritism, beauty-worship, and the need to impress with our beauty. But—does this liberation mean there is a *problem* with beauty? Should a beautiful woman become plain? Does Peter (above) mean she may not be beautiful? Should natural beauty be enjoyed? Should beautiful clothing, jewellery and objects be regarded with suspicion? Should we reverse-discriminate against the beautiful, choosing ugly leaders, or dressing down in public, or praising plainness?

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