On Being Aesthetic Unequals:
The Case of Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract. Aesthetic appearance is a powerful source of various forms of unjust social relations, such as demeaning stereotypes, discrimination, harassment, and social exclusion. Surprisingly, however, the issue of aesthetic injustice has been largely overlooked in the relational egalitarian literature. This paper addresses this gap by examining aesthetic injustice in the context of homelessness. It argues that individuals experiencing homelessness are subject to two distinct kinds of aesthetic injustice. First, they are treated as disgusting elements of the urban landscape that must be rendered physically invisible in prime public areas. Second, they are deprived of the aesthetic resources necessary to control and shape how they present themselves to others. By drawing these two aspects together, this paper proposes a novel account of the aesthetic dimensions of relational equality: it shows that achieving relational equality requires not only fostering inclusive and egalitarian social norms of respectable appearance but also enabling individuals to exercise reasonable control over their appearance as equal self-presenting persons.

Keywords. Aesthetic injustice; homelessness; relational equality; self-presentation; social hierarchy; stigma.

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1. Introduction

Our outward appearance plays a crucial role in shaping how we are regarded and treated across various social contexts. Empirical research indicates that children perceived as unattractive often receive significantly less nurturing care than their attractive counterparts. For example, studies show that parents are generally more affectionate and playful with attractive infants, whereas they are more likely to focus on routine caregiving and attend to others when interacting with less attractive infants.[1] In educational settings, attractive children receive more encouragement from teachers, while unattractive children are frequently perceived as less academically competent.[2]

In adulthood, appearance continues to significantly shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. Those perceived as physically attractive are more likely to occupy prestigious positions and earn higher salaries.[3] Individuals with visible adornments, such as unconventional piercings or extreme hairstyles, often face discrimination in the workplace.[4] People perceived as less attractive are also given less attention, are more likely to be regarded as less competent, and are less likely to have their opinions taken seriously.[5] Finally, in legal contexts, attractive defendants tend to receive more lenient judgments, whereas unattractive victims, particularly in cases like rape, are often seen as more blameworthy.[6]

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[1] Langlois *et al*., "Infant Attractiveness Predicts Maternal Behaviors and Attitudes."
[2] Parks and Kennedy, "The Impact of Race, Physical Attractiveness, and Gender on Education Majors' and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Competence."
[3] Hamermesh, *Beauty Pays*; Monk, Esposito, and Lee, "Beholding Inequality."
[4] Mason, *What's Wrong with Lookism?*; Cavico, Muffler, and Mujtaba, "Appearance Discrimination, "Lookism" and "Lookphobia" in the Workplace."
[5] Hofmann, "Aesthetic Injustice"; Jackson, Hunter, and Hodge, "Physical Attractiveness and Intellectual Competence."
[6] Thorton and Rychman, "The Influence of a Rape Victim's Physical Attractiveness on Observers' Attributions of Responsibility"; Wareham *et al*., "The Impact of Victim Attractiveness on Victim Blameworthiness and Defendant Guilt Determination in Cases of Domestic and Sexual Assault." For a helpful overview of empirical studies on appearance-based discrimination, see also Irvin, "Resisting Body Oppression," 2-5. Notice, however, that while all these forms of discrimination disadvantage people, this does not necessarily entail that they are all *unjust*. In some contexts, particularly hiring decisions, certain aesthetic features might arguably constitute legitimate "reaction qualifications", that is, "qualifications that count as such because of the responses of those with whom the successful candidate will interact in the course of performing the duties associated with the role" (Mason, *What's Wrong with Lookism?*, 27).

Aesthetic appearance, therefore, can be a powerful source of various forms of unjust social relations. Surprisingly, however, the issue of aesthetic injustice has been largely overlooked in the relational egalitarian literature.[7] The aim of this article is to fill this lacuna by examining aesthetic injustice within the context of homelessness. Exploring aesthetic injustice in this context is important for three reasons. First, the existing philosophical literature on homelessness has paid relatively little attention to how individuals experiencing homelessness are treated as aesthetic inferiors within society.[8] By addressing this gap, this article sheds light on a hitherto under-examined source of harm associated with homelessness.

Second, the case of homelessness reveals a distinctive kind of aesthetic injustice that has been neglected in the literature. Specifically, it demonstrates that individuals suffer from aesthetic injustice not only when and because they are unfairly treated based on their appearance but also when and because they are deprived of the resources necessary to exercise reasonable control over their appearance. In other words, aesthetic injustice involves not only ascribing aesthetic disvalue to individuals but also denying them the opportunity to ascribe aesthetic value to themselves through the control and shaping of their outward appearance.

Finally, this analysis yields significant and original implications for understanding the aesthetic dimensions of relational equality: it shows that achieving relational equality requires not only fostering inclusive and egalitarian social norms of respectable appearance but also enabling individuals to exercise reasonable control over their appearance as equal self-presenting persons.

This article is structured as follows. Section 2 defines what aesthetic judgements are and clarifies when, and why, they are unjust from a relational egalitarian perspective. Building

[7] Notable exceptions include Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?," 335-336; Brecka, "Relational Egalitarianism and Aesthetic Equality"; Lippert-Rasmussen, *Relational Egalitarianism*, 83-84.
[8] Political philosophers have primarily focused on other harms caused by homelessness, particularly the loss of freedom. See Essert, "Property and Homelessness"; Waldron, "Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom"; Wells, "Homelessness and Freedom."

on this, Sections 3 and 4 analyse the specific kinds of aesthetic injustice suffered by individuals experiencing homelessness. Section 3 argues that homeless people are treated as aesthetic inferiors by being regarded as disgusting elements of the urban landscape that must be rendered physically invisible in prime public spaces. Section 4 contends that homeless people are treated as aesthetic inferiors by also being deprived of the aesthetic resources necessary to control and shape how they present themselves to others. Finally, Section 5 draws these two aspects together to propose a novel account of the aesthetic dimensions of relational equality. It argues that a society of equals should cultivate inclusive and egalitarian social norms of respectable appearance and ensure that everyone has access to the aesthetic resources necessary to exercise meaningful control over their appearance as equal self-presenting persons.

2. Aesthetic Judgements and Aesthetic Injustice

Aesthetic judgements are evaluations of whether, and to what extent, a given object, *o*, possesses valuable aesthetic properties, *P*, or disvaluable aesthetic properties, *Q*.[9] These judgements can be directed towards various objects and grounded in different aesthetic properties. For instance, Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* is admired for its swirling patterns and vibrant colour palette. In contrast, a poorly executed painting may feature mismatched colours and a lack of coherence in composition. In the natural world, the Grand Canyon is revered for its vast, awe-inspiring beauty and its layered rock formations. Conversely, a litter-strewn urban lot with trash scattered across the ground is perceived as an eyesore, lacking any positive aesthetic value.

Aesthetic judgements towards human beings, therefore, are evaluations of whether, and to what extent, their *appearance* comprises valuable aesthetic properties, *P*, or disvaluable aesthetic properties, *Q*. By "appearance", I refer to the outward presentation of individuals, which

[9] For further discussion of the nature of aesthetic judgements, see Zangwill, "Aesthetic Judgment."

encompasses both (i) visual appearance and (ii) olfactory presentation. Visual appearance includes physical features – such as height, body size, facial characteristics, skin tone, and hairstyle – as well as grooming, and the style and cleanliness of clothing. Olfactory presentation pertains to the scents associated with an individual, including pleasant fragrances, such as perfumes or colognes, and unpleasant odours that may arise from sweat or lack of cleanliness.

Accordingly, aesthetic judgements about people involve assessing the value (or lack thereof) of the aesthetic properties that constitute their outward presentation. For example, being tall is often considered a valuable aesthetic property, and people with blonde hair are frequently regarded as more beautiful in certain cultural contexts. Conversely, shorter stature or unconventional hair colours are generally perceived as disvaluable aesthetic properties, leading to negative judgements about an individual's visual appearance. Similarly, in terms of olfactory presentation, a person wearing a pleasant fragrance, such as a popular perfume, might be perceived more favourably compared to someone with an unpleasant body odour.

Having clarified what aesthetic judgements are, the relevant question is: when and under what conditions, if any, might aesthetic judgements become unjust from a relational egalitarian perspective?

According to relational egalitarianism, a just society is defined by the absence of social hierarchies that rank individuals in positions of inferiority or superiority.[10] However, not all social hierarchies are morally objectionable. Relational egalitarians typically distinguish between social hierarchies based on *respect* and those based on *esteem*. "To respect something is […] to regard it as requiring restrictions on the moral acceptability of actions connected with it".[11] More precisely, to be respected as a person means being treated as a self-originating source of moral obligations, whose validity is not contingent upon the consequences of

[10] Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?"; Lippert-Rasmussen, *Relational Egalitarianism*; O'Neill, "What Should Egalitarians Believe?"; Scheffler, "What Is Egalitarianism?"; Schemmel, *Justice and Egalitarian Relations*; Viehoff, "Power and Equality."
[11] Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," 40.

fulfilling those obligations.[12] Thus, persons are *owed* equal respect simply by virtue of their status as moral equals – a status that is not contingent upon possessing particular valuable features or traits (aside from those morally significant properties that ground moral personhood).[13] Consequently, any social hierarchy based on differences in respect is incompatible with the moral imperative to treat individuals as moral equals.

In contrast, esteem "consists in a positive appraisal of a person, or his qualities".[14] Equal esteem is *not* owed to persons in virtue of their status as moral equals; rather, it is accorded to someone if, and to the extent that, they possess certain valuable, though not necessarily morally significant, features or traits. For instance, not everyone is owed equal esteem as a piano player. A professional pianist, who consistently delivers outstanding performances, is likely to earn high appraisal for their musical abilities. Conversely, someone who plays piano at an amateur level may not receive the same esteem. This inequality of esteem, however, is not morally objectionable because it does not violate the equal respect that is owed to both professional and amateur piano players as moral equals.

Aesthetic hierarchies are a kind of esteem-based hierarchy that ranks individuals in positions of inferiority or superiority based on the possession of perceived (dis)valuable traits or features. Accordingly, to understand when and under what conditions, if any, aesthetic judgements become unjust from a relational egalitarian perspective, we must examine when and under what conditions, if any, social hierarchies based on esteem are morally objectionable.

I argue that esteem-based social hierarchies are unjust when, and because, they either (i) *rest upon* or (ii) *generate* a respect-based social hierarchy.[15] Esteem-based hierarchies rest

[12] Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," 543.
[13] For further discussion of the valuable properties that are often invoked to be the basis of persons' equal moral status, see Floris and Kirby (eds.), *How Can We Be Equals?*.
[14] Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," 39.
[15] For further discussion on the wrongness of esteem-based social hierarchies from a relational egalitarian perspective, see also Anderson, "Equality"; Fourie, "To Praise and to Scorn"; Jutten, "Dignity, Esteem, and Social Contribution"; Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?*, ch. 3.

upon respect-based hierarchies when the latter serve as the basis for the former, that is, when judgements of (dis)esteem for certain traits are grounded in or influenced by underlying hierarchies of respect. For instance, consider a society where piano players are ranked based on their musical abilities, but this ranking is influenced by racist norms that assume white individuals to be inherently more talented than people of colour. In this society, regardless of how skilled an individual musician may be, their place in the hierarchy of musical talent is determined, at least in part, by their group membership rather than their actual musical ability. This esteem-based hierarchy, therefore, is unjust because it is an expression of an underlying hierarchy in which individuals of colour are not accorded an equal degree of respect as their white counterparts. In other words, even though the hierarchy appears to be based on esteem (i.e., musical talent), it is morally objectionable because it partially rests upon a racist hierarchy that is incompatible with the principle of equal respect for all persons.[16]

By contrast, esteem-based hierarchies generate respect-based hierarchies when the former serve as the basis for the latter, that is, when judgements of (dis)esteem for certain traits cause individuals to be treated as moral inferiors or superiors. To appreciate this, consider a fatphobic society in which "fat"[17] individuals are ranked at the bottom of the aesthetic hierarchy. Due to their lower position in the aesthetic hierarchy, fat people face various forms of inferiorising treatment, including bullying, exclusion, and discrimination. These forms of unequal treatment reflect a broader societal attitude that fat individuals are less worthy of respect and moral consideration.[18] In this case, the esteem-based hierarchy generates a respect-based

[16] This kind of esteem-based hierarchy is an instance of what Rachel Fraser has called "artistic injustice". See Fraser, "Aesthetic Injustice."
[17] For why the term "fat" is preferable to pathologising terms like "overweight" or "obese" when describing individuals in a certain weight category, see Manne, *Unshrinking*, 9-11.
[18] Manne, *Unshrinking*.

hierarchy, where fat people are denied the equal respect owed to them as moral equals. Therefore, this aesthetic hierarchy is unjust from a relational egalitarian perspective.[19]

We can now come full circle. Aesthetic judgements towards persons are evaluations of whether, and to what extent, their appearance comprises valuable aesthetic properties, *P*, or disvaluable aesthetic properties, *Q*. Aesthetic judgements become unjust from a relational egalitarian perspective when and because:

(i) The aesthetic hierarchy rests upon a respect-based social hierarchy, where individuals are deemed aesthetically inferior due to their inferior status in the respect-based social hierarchy, or

(ii) The aesthetic hierarchy generates a respect-based social hierarchy, where individuals who are deemed aesthetically inferior are consequently denied the equal respect owed to all persons as moral equals.

3. Aesthetic Injustice, Homelessness, and Physical Invisibility

Building on the previous analysis, in what follows, I examine the specific kinds of aesthetic injustice that individuals experiencing homelessness are subjected to. In this section, I argue that homeless people are treated as aesthetic inferiors by being regarded as disgusting elements of the urban landscape that must be rendered physically invisible in prime urban areas. In the next section, I contend that they are treated as aesthetic inferiors also by being deprived of the aesthetic resources necessary to exercise reasonable control over their appearance as equal self-presenting persons.

[19] To be sure, not all forms of appearance-based discrimination generate respect-based hierarchies. For example, if people who are bald or have red hair are regarded as less attractive, this does not necessarily constitute a respect-based hierarchy. More generally, whether a particular form of appearance-based discrimination gives rise to such a hierarchy depends on one's specific account of the demands of the principle of respect for persons – that is, on whether the relevant attitudes and behaviours towards individuals, based on certain aesthetic features, are incompatible with what is owed to them as a matter of respect for their equal moral status. While providing a fully worked-out account of the demands of respect falls beyond the scope of this paper, in Section 3 I analyse how the inferior position of homeless individuals within the aesthetic hierarchy generates a respect-based hierarchy that violates their status as moral equals.

The outward appearance of homeless individuals starkly reflects their social status. Due to a lack of shelter, their visual appearance typically shows pronounced signs of deterioration. This includes unkempt hair and damaged skin from prolonged exposure to harsh weather conditions, such as sunburn, windburn, or frostbite in colder climates. Their clothing is frequently worn, unwashed, and ill-fitting, indicative of restricted access to laundry facilities and clean garments. Many homeless individuals who struggle with substance use disorders also exhibit visible signs of drug addiction and chronic alcoholism, such as track marks on the arms from intravenous drug use, and dilated blood vessels on the cheeks and nose. Additionally, their visual appearance may display signs of rapid weight loss, untreated skin infections, or open sores, which are all common consequences of long-term substance use and inadequate medical care.

Beyond their visual appearance, homeless individuals often bear distinctive olfactory markers of their social status. Limited access to sanitation facilities leads to strong body odours from prolonged periods without bathing, causing sweat, oils, and grime to accumulate on the skin. The fabric of their garments also tends to absorb unpleasant smells from sweat, smoke, or food. Additionally, these olfactory markers might be exacerbated by substance use: for example, the sharp scent of alcohol or the pungent odour of drugs like methamphetamine often defines the olfactory presentation of homeless people who suffer from drug and alcohol use disorders.

I argue that the combination of these visual and olfactory traits constitutes what I term *aesthetic stigma symbols*.[20] These are disvaluable properties of an individual's outward presentation, easily perceptible to others, that function as markers on the basis of which their bearers are considered and treated as inferiors. Therefore, by embodying these symbols, homeless individuals are marked as aesthetically inferior, occupying the lowest rank in society's aesthetic

[20] Here I am indebted to Erving Goffman's influential analysis of stigma. See Goffman, *Stigma*.

hierarchy. They are perceived as dirty, unkempt, and unsightly, eliciting disgust and discomfort from other members of society. More precisely, my main contention is that the possession of aesthetic stigma symbols confers upon individuals experiencing homelessness the inferior social status of *personae non gratae*, making them the object of attitudes of disgust and contempt, and leading to their exclusion or removal from prime public spaces – that is, highly desirable areas due to their location, amenities, or historical significance. As a result, they are treated not as equal persons with whom to share the public space, but as disgusting elements of the urban landscape that must be rendered *physically invisible* in such areas.[21] Consequently, the lower position of individuals experiencing homelessness within the aesthetic hierarchy serves as a basis for regarding and treating them as moral inferiors.[22]

To illustrate this, consider how society systematically excludes or removes homeless individuals from prime public areas, such as parks, squares, and commercial streets, through the implementation of zoning policies and the use of tactics like "anti-homeless" laws and "hostile" or "defensive" architecture.

Anti-homeless laws criminalise actions that homeless individuals are forced to perform in public due to their lack of private property or reliable access to shelter. These laws target

[21] In the following paragraphs, I build on my discussion of physical invisibility developed in Floris, "The Invisible Social Class," 1283-1286. In this article, I extend that analysis by integrating it into a broader framework of aesthetic injustice, showing that being rendered physically invisible constitutes a specific way in which homeless individuals are treated as aesthetic inferiors.

[22] It might be objected that the aesthetic disvalue of homeless individuals' outward appearance (such as unkempt hair, worn clothing, and bad odour) is derivative: these traits are stigmatised because they symbolise, or are associated with, homelessness. Therefore, the basis of the injustice is primarily social (homelessness) rather than aesthetic (outward appearance). Accordingly, strictly speaking, the corresponding injustice is not a kind of aesthetic injustice. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

In response, two points are worth noting: first, it is unclear whether the disvalue of these traits is purely derivative. Many aesthetic features associated with homelessness, like damaged skin, worn clothes, and body odours, appear to elicit disgust independently of their association with homelessness. Accordingly, it seems plausible to hold that these aesthetic properties themselves confer an inferior status, making their bearers the object of objectionable attitudes of contempt and disgust.

Second, even if the aesthetic disvalue of homeless individuals' appearance is entirely derivative, it does not necessarily follow that the resulting injustice is not aesthetic in nature. Rather, this would suggest that this is an aesthetic hierarchy that *rests upon*, rather than *generates*, a respect-based hierarchy. In this case, homeless individuals are positioned at the bottom of the aesthetic hierarchy (i.e., they are regarded as disgusting individuals) because they occupy an inferior position within the respect-based hierarchy. The aesthetic injustice, then, lies in the way the aesthetic value judgements are shaped by and reflect an underlying respect-based hierarchy that violates homeless individuals' status as moral equals.

behaviours such as vagrancy, loitering, sitting or lying on city sidewalks, trespassing, sleeping or camping in public spaces, and panhandling.[23] Enforcement patterns vary significantly across different urban areas, reflecting broader social and economic inequalities. For instance, homeless encampments located in marginalised areas of the city are often left undisturbed, while those that become visible in affluent urban areas are quickly dismantled.[24] Similarly, homeless individuals are more likely to be fined for loitering in residential or commercial districts, while they are permitted to remain in socially deprived neighbourhoods.

This selective enforcement pattern indicates that anti-homeless laws are not merely intended to regulate behaviour but are part of a broader strategy to "cleanse" highly visible areas of homeless populations.[25] Zero-tolerance policies in prime urban spaces, such as downtown retail zones and residential areas, effectively exclude or remove homeless people from these environments, rendering them invisible to the general public.[26] In these cases, homeless individuals are not excluded (solely) based on their behaviour but (also) because their presence disrupts the aesthetic order of these carefully curated urban spaces.[27]

Another key example of how society seeks to render homeless people physically invisible is through the deployment of "hostile" architecture. This form of urban design deliberately deters or discourages certain behaviours to make public environments less accessible to individuals experiencing homelessness.[28] Common examples include "anti-sleep" benches with armrests that divide the seating area to prevent lying down, and "ground spikes" that deter people from standing in certain areas.[29] In addition to these direct deterrents, cities often

[23] Amaral, "Who Banishes?"; Amster, "Patterns of Exclusion."
[24] Bonds and Martin, "Treating People like Pollution," 139.
[25] Amaral, "Who Banishes?"
[26] Stuart, "On the Streets, Under Arrest: Policing Homelessness in the 21st Century."
[27] Consider, for instance, the Canadian National Capital Commission (NCC)'s mandate for "beautification" of parks. Officers of the NCC were authorised to confiscate the belongings of homeless individuals, dismissing their personal items as "garbage" in violation of the beautification goals. See Walby and Lippert, "Spatial Regulation, Dispersal, and the Aesthetics of the City," 1024.
[28] Albertsen and Knight, "Anti-Homeless Hostile Design as Wrongful Discrimination"; de Fine Licht, "Hostile Urban Architecture."
[29] Rosenberger, *Callous Objects*.

remove essential public amenities – such as water fountains, benches, and public restrooms – from prime urban spaces to discourage homeless people from dwelling there.[30]

Hostile architecture represents an attempt to control the visibility of homeless individuals by transforming public spaces into exclusionary zones that cater to the aesthetic preferences of wealthier, housed residents. In doing so, society expresses objectionable attitudes of disgust towards individuals experiencing homelessness, treating them as *personae non gratae*, that is, individuals who are not entitled to inhabit or make use of prime public spaces as equals.[31]

In conclusion, I argue that the practices of anti-homelessness laws and hostile architecture constitute a form of aesthetic injustice.[32] These measures are concrete manifestations of how negative aesthetic judgements about homeless individuals are institutionalised into the regulation and design of public spaces. By embedding these judgements into policy regulation and urban planning, society ascribes to individuals experiencing homelessness the inferior social status of *personae non gratae*. As a result, they are treated as aesthetic inferiors by being regarded as disgusting individuals, whose appearance in prime urban areas is unacceptable and therefore must be rendered physically invisible.

4. Aesthetic Injustice, Homelessness, and Self-Presentation

In this section, I argue that aesthetic injustice involves not only ascribing aesthetic disvalue to an individual but also denying them the opportunity to ascribe aesthetic value to themselves

[30] Chellew, "Defending Suburbia".
[31] Notice that the wrongness of these strategies rests on their social meaning – i.e., the objectionable attitudes they express toward homeless individuals – regardless of the intent of those adopting and enforcing them. Notably, however, many cities have explicitly justified these strategies as necessary measures to remove or exclude homeless individuals from high-visibility areas. As Maria Foscarinis notes, "Some cities state expressly that their intention is to drive their homeless residents out of the city. Examples include policies or plans to 'force' homeless people out of town; to make clear that they are 'no longer welcome in the City;' to make the city 'inhospitable to homeless people;' and 'to show these folks where the city limits are'" (Foscarinis, "Downward Spiral: Homelessness and Its Criminalization", 22-23).
[32] However, this is not to say that these practices are morally objectionable only *qua* forms of aesthetic injustice. I address the variety of reasons for objecting to anti-homeless laws and hostile architecture in Floris, "The Invisible Social Class," 1283-1286.

through the control and shaping of their outward appearance. In particular, I contend that homeless people are treated as aesthetic inferiors also because they lack adequate aesthetic resources to exercise reasonable control over their appearance as equal self-presenting individuals. My argument proceeds in five steps:

1. A self-presenting person has the ability to shape and control how they present themselves to others, at least to some degree, and, consequently, how they are perceived by them. This capacity is integral to an individual's ability to create and maintain meaningful social relationships and essential to their status as equal autonomous agents. On the one hand, to create and maintain different kinds of social relationships, people must have some reasonable degree of control over which aspects of themselves they wish to reveal to others and how they choose to present those aspects.[33] For instance, in intimate relationships, people may choose to reveal personal vulnerabilities or values that they might not share in professional social settings. With close friends, they may adopt a more relaxed and open demeanour, freely expressing humour, interests, and personal struggles. In contrast, within professional relationships, people typically present a more formal image, emphasising competence and reliability. This variability allows individuals to adapt their self-presentation to align with the norms and desired impressions in each social setting, facilitating deeper connections in intimate or personal relationships while maintaining boundaries and respect in professional contexts. Accordingly, having a reasonable degree of control over one's self-presentation is essential to creating and maintaining meaningful social relationships.

On the other hand, being an autonomous person involves the ability "to define or invent or create oneself".[34] An autonomous individual cultivates and maintains a robust sense of self that remains, to some extent, independent of external pressures and influences. Moreover, they

[33] Marmor, "What Is the Right to Privacy?," 8.
[34] Velleman, *Self to Self: Selected Essays*, 203.

exercise some degree of control over how they are perceived and understood by others by managing, at least in part, "what is inner and what is outer, what is presented and what is hidden".[35] In other words, an autonomous individual develops and maintains a self-aware perspective on their role and identity in the world, while also shaping the terms in which they are understood by others. Consequently, being recognised as a self-presenting person is fundamental to being recognised as an equal autonomous person. As David Velleman puts it, "not to be seen as a self-presenting creature would be socially disqualifying" because it undermines a person's status as "a competent self-presenter eligible to participate in conversation, cooperation, and other forms of interaction".[36]

For this reason, I argue that individuals have a basic interest in maintaining and exercising a reasonable degree of control over how they present themselves to others. Treating persons as equals, therefore, entails recognising them as self-presenting beings – "as beings who have a say in how [they] are to be seen by others".[37]

2. Outward appearance plays a crucial role in how individuals present themselves to others, as various features of one's visual appearance convey a wide range of personal identities, values, and affiliations. For example, wearing a kippa signifies an individual's affiliation with the Jewish community, while donning a keffiyeh is commonly associated with Palestinian identity. Wearing a suit and tie conveys professionalism, while casual clothing signals approachability. Physical features, such as tattoos, may reflect personal stories, cultural heritage, or artistic expression.[38]

Moreover, olfactory cues also contribute to individuals' self-presentation. The scents one chooses to wear can evoke specific associations or convey personal identity. For instance, wearing an earthy scent might indicate a connection to nature or environmental values.

[35] Sangiovanni, *Humanity without Dignity*, 83.
[36] Velleman, *Self to Self: Selected Essays*, 55.
[37] Sangiovanni, *Humanity without Dignity*, 83.
[38] Mason, *What Is Wrong with Lookism?*

Conversely, the decision not to wear makeup or perfume can serve as a political statement, particularly within feminist movements. This choice may express a rejection of traditional beauty norms that dictate how women should present themselves, allowing them to assert their autonomy by challenging societal expectations through this aesthetic choice.[39]

Together, visual and olfactory aspects of an individual's outward appearance are essential to how they present themselves to others. Therefore, having a reasonable degree of control over one's outward appearance is essential to being a self-presenting person.

3. To have a reasonable degree of control over one's outward appearance, a person must have access to adequate *aesthetic resources*. By "aesthetic resources", I refer to the materials, tools, and conditions that enable individuals to shape and sustain their outward appearance. More precisely, "aesthetic resources" are resources that either directly contribute to an individual's aesthetic properties or are constitutive components of such properties. For example, access to basic facilities, like showers and sanitation supplies, enables individuals to maintain personal cleanliness. Grooming products, such as shampoo, soap, and razors, are essential for individuals to manage aspects of their physical appearance, like hair, skin, and facial features. Clothing and accessories are powerful media of self-expression: for example, accessories like jewellery, hats, or even eyeglasses can contribute to an individual's outward appearance by communicating cultural or personal affiliations. Access to hairstyling tools, such as brushes and scissors, or services like haircuts, is necessary for individuals to control aspects of their appearance that are important in many cultural contexts.

Aesthetic resources, therefore, are essential to shape and control one's outward appearance. Consequently, having access to adequate aesthetic resources is necessary to maintain a reasonable degree of control over how an individual presents themselves to others.

[39] To be sure, this is not to say that women have a duty to refrain from wearing makeup or perfume to oppose gender-oppressive beauty norms. For further discussion, see Knowles and Lopes Melo, "How to Dress like a Feminist: a Relational Ethics of Non-Complicity."

4. Individuals experiencing homelessness lack adequate aesthetic resources to shape and control their outward appearance in meaningful ways. As discussed in the previous section, due to the lack of private property or reliable access to shelter, homeless individuals often endure prolonged exposure to harsh weather, which leaves visible effects such as unkempt hair, sunburn, and damaged skin. Without access to essential grooming resources, they are unable to manage basic aspects of their appearance that most people take for granted: for instance, the inability to get a regular haircut leaves hair overgrown or uneven. Additionally, limited access to hygiene facilities, such as restrooms and showers, prevents homeless people from cleaning themselves or their clothing, leading to visibly worn, mismatched, and unwashed garments.

Ultimately, homeless individuals lack adequate aesthetic resources to exercise a reasonable degree of control over their outward appearance.

5. Therefore, I argue that individuals experiencing homelessness are treated as aesthetic inferiors by being deprived of the adequate aesthetic resources necessary to exercise reasonable control over their outward appearance. Lacking these resources, they are unable to manage the boundary between what is presented and what is concealed – that is, they cannot choose which aspects of their appearance to reveal or withhold, as most people routinely do. Accordingly, they are incapable of determining the terms in which they are to be understood and recognised by others. This constitutes a form of aesthetic injustice that undermines their status as equal self-presenting persons who are capable of shaping and controlling how they present themselves to others.

To conclude, in this section, I argued that individuals experiencing homelessness are treated as aesthetic inferiors not only by being ascribed aesthetic disvalue by others, regarded as disgusting individuals whose appearance in prime urban areas must be rendered physically invisible, but also by being denied the opportunity to ascribe aesthetic value to themselves

through the control and shaping of their outward appearance. My argument can be summarised as follows:

1. Treating persons as equals entails recognising them as self-presenting persons.
2. Having a reasonable degree of control over one's appearance is essential to being a self-presenting person.
3. Having access to adequate aesthetic resources is necessary to maintain a reasonable degree of control over how one presents oneself to others.
4. Homeless people lack adequate aesthetic resources.
5. Therefore, homeless people are treated as aesthetic inferiors because they are deprived of the adequate aesthetic resources necessary to exercise reasonable control over their appearance as equal self-presenting persons.

5. On Being Aesthetic Equals: Aesthetic Norms and Aesthetic Resources

In this final section, I explore the broader implications of my analysis of aesthetic injustice in the context of homelessness to propose a novel account of the aesthetic dimensions of relational equality. I argue that achieving relational equality requires (i) fostering inclusive and egalitarian social norms of respectable appearance and (ii) ensuring that everyone has access to adequate aesthetic resources to exercise reasonable control over their outward appearance. This is a significant finding for relational egalitarianism: it demonstrates, contrary to what is sometimes suggested,[40] that providing individuals with aesthetic resources is not only compatible with but also required by the demands of relational equality.

In Section 3, I argued that individuals experiencing homelessness are subject to aesthetic injustice because they are treated as *personae non gratae*, that is, disgusting elements of the urban landscape that must be rendered physically invisible in prime public areas. In what

[40] Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?" 335-336.

follows, I argue that addressing this kind of aesthetic injustice requires revising the social norms of "respectable appearance". By social norms of respectable appearance, I refer to the aesthetic standards, which are generally endorsed within society, of what counts as an acceptable or valued way of presenting oneself in public spaces.[41] Specifically, I argue that, from a relational egalitarian perspective, addressing aesthetic injustice requires promoting social norms of respectable appearance that are both (i) inclusive and (ii) egalitarian.

Social norms of respectable appearance are inclusive when the range of valuable aesthetic properties, *P*, whose possession is deemed an acceptable way of presenting oneself in public spaces, is very broad and, conversely, the range of disvaluable aesthetic properties, *Q*, whose possession is deemed an unacceptable way of presenting oneself in public spaces, is very narrow.

For example, under inclusive social norms of appearance, aesthetic properties commonly associated with homelessness, such as worn clothing, uncut hair, or visible signs of exposure to the elements, would no longer be seen as "aesthetic stigma symbols" that signify neglect or failure to conform to accepted standards. For instance, untrimmed hair or weather-worn skin is often perceived as unattractive in a society that values polished, well-groomed appearances. However, under more inclusive aesthetic norms, these aesthetic properties would be viewed as part of a broader spectrum of respectable appearances, rather than as grounds for stigmatisation and exclusion. By broadening the aesthetic standards for what is considered a respectable appearance, therefore, traits often associated with homeless individuals would no longer elicit negative judgement. This would promote a more inclusive and egalitarian society where differences in appearance do not compromise one's status as an equal and, consequently,

[41] As Adam Smith famously observed, social norms of respectable appearance vary significantly across different societies. As he wrote: "Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them. In Scotland, custom has rendered them a necessary of life to the lowest order of men; but not to the same order of women, who may, without any discredit, walk about barefooted" (Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1168).

their right to be included and welcome in public spaces, but rather reflect a diverse community where multiple forms of outward appearance are accepted and respected.

At this point, however, it might be objected that homelessness is, at least in part, a form of economic deprivation. The appearance features that lead to homeless people being treated as inferiors, such as unkempt hair, worn and badly fitting clothing, uncleanliness and odour, are rooted in a lack of economic resources. Arguably, then, it is this economic injustice that is fundamental and that must be addressed. Therefore, to suggest that part of the solution lies in broadening the aesthetic standards for what counts as respectable appearance might seem misplaced.[42]

In response, two points are worth noting: first, as will become clearer below, I am not arguing that fostering inclusive and egalitarian social norms of respectable appearance is the only or the most important response to aesthetic injustice. A just society should also ensure that everyone is provided with adequate aesthetic resources to exercise meaningful control over their outward appearance. The relative importance of these responses, in turn, depends on the social context and the individuals affected. For example, revising social norms of respectable appearance is especially important when aesthetic injustice arises not from material deprivation but from how certain appearances are socially disvalued, such as in the case of people with visible disabilities or gender-nonconforming appearances.

Second, in the case of individuals experiencing homelessness, although it is indeed more urgent to address material deprivation by ensuring that they have access to adequate aesthetic resources, revising the aesthetic standards remains part of the solution. To illustrate this, imagine a society in which everyone has sufficient aesthetic resources to meet existing Western standards of respectable appearance. Suppose an individual chooses not to conform to those standards – perhaps by wearing the same clothes frequently or not trimming their hair regularly.

[42] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

As a result, this person looks "homeless", even though they are not. From a relational egalitarian perspective, this individual's outward appearance should not undermine their status as an equal person entitled to occupy prime public spaces, such as parks and squares, on equal terms with others.

Let us now analyse when social norms of respectable appearance are not only inclusive but also egalitarian. I suggest that such norms are egalitarian when (a) they are universally applied to everyone, and (b) they impose the same aesthetic standards on each individual.[43] To illustrate point (a), consider a racist society where social norms of respectable appearance, though inclusive, are not universally applied. In such a society, only persons of colour are expected to conform to outward appearances deemed acceptable by others. This inegalitarian social norm expresses an objectionable aesthetic hierarchy, as the position of persons of colour within it is shaped by their inferior status within the respect-based hierarchy. Specifically, their social status is contingent upon conforming to imposed aesthetic standards that both reflect and reinforce their inferior position within the broader social order. Thus, this constitutes an unjust aesthetic hierarchy because it rests upon a respect-based hierarchy that denies people of colour the equal respect owed to everyone as equals.

To illustrate point (b), consider instead a patriarchal society where social norms of respectable appearance are both inclusive and universally applied to everyone, yet they impose differing aesthetic standards on men and women. In this society, men are only required to meet very minimal aesthetic standards (e.g., being dressed appropriately to ensure their genitalia is not exposed), whereas women are subject to much more rigorous standards. For instance, women might be expected to wear skirts and heels to be seen as presentable or professionally appropriate. This discrepancy creates an aesthetic hierarchy, where the higher demands placed

[43] Here I am indebted to Joshua Brecka's analysis of aesthetic equality. See Brecka, "Relational Egalitarianism and Aesthetic Equality." For a more general discussion of social norms and relational equality, see also van Wietmarschen, "Stratified Social Norms."

on women reinforce a respect-based social hierarchy. Women are expected to invest significantly more time, effort, and resources to meet the same level of social esteem that men attain with far less effort. Accordingly, these gender-based oppressive aesthetic norms are incompatible with the ideal of relational equality.[44]

In sum, from a relational egalitarian standpoint, addressing aesthetic injustice requires fostering norms of respectable appearance that are both inclusive and egalitarian. This entails that individuals are treated as aesthetic equals when (a) their outward appearance is accepted as a legitimate way of presenting oneself in public spaces, and (b) they are subject to the same aesthetic standards as others.

However, I argue that promoting inclusive and egalitarian social norms of respectable appearance alone is insufficient to address the aesthetic dimensions of relational equality. This is because, as I showed in section 4, aesthetic injustice relates not only to how individuals are seen by others but also to their ability to see themselves positively through control over their outward appearance. Thus, achieving relational equality also requires ensuring everyone has access to adequate aesthetic resources to exercise reasonable control over how they present themselves to others.

To see this, imagine a society where social norms of respectable appearance are both inclusive and egalitarian. In such a society, a wide range of aesthetic traits, including diverse physical characteristics, grooming practices, and styles, are recognised as acceptable ways of presenting oneself in public spaces. Consequently, no one is perceived as inherently disgusting or out of place; everyone is accepted and welcomed in prominent urban spaces as an equal.

[44] Brecka, "Relational Egalitarianism and Aesthetic Equality," 8; Lippert-Rasmussen, *Relational Egalitarianism*, 83-84. It is important to note that social norms of respectable appearance need not be egalitarian in the (distributive) sense of requiring that everyone's outward appearance receive *equal* admiration or praise. As discussed in Section 2, equality of esteem is not owed to individuals merely by virtue of their status as moral equals. Thus, aesthetic hierarchies are not inherently objectionable, as long as they do not rest upon or generate hierarchies of respect by violating conditions (a) and (b).

Now consider individuals experiencing homelessness. Although in this society they are not regarded as disgusting elements of the urban landscape that must be rendered physically invisible in prime public spaces, their outward appearance remains largely determined by their social status, due to the lack of access to adequate aesthetic resources. For example, they cannot select or wear fresh garments, often relying on items that are donated or discarded. They are unable to maintain haircuts or other grooming practices, as they do not have the financial resources necessary to purchase these services. Furthermore, they struggle to manage their body odour due to the lack of access to basic hygiene facilities.

I argue that, in this society, homeless people are still treated as aesthetic inferiors because they are denied the opportunity to ascribe aesthetic value to themselves through the control and shaping of their outward appearance. More precisely, my main contention is that the inability to exercise a reasonable degree of control over one's outward appearance – *regardless of* whether it is regarded with disgust by others – constitutes a form of aesthetic injustice, as it undermines an individual's status as an equal self-presenting person. Put differently, the wrongness of denying control over how someone presents themselves to others does not depend on others' negative judgements of their appearance. Rather, such denial is morally objectionable in and of itself because it violates individuals' status as equal autonomous persons capable of presenting themselves on their own terms, at least to some degree.[45] Accordingly, I contend that providing adequate aesthetic resources necessary for individuals to exercise reasonable control over their outward appearance is essential for addressing the aesthetic dimensions of relational equality.

Overall, then, I argue that persons are treated as aesthetic equals if and only if:

[45] Thomas Nagel captures a similar concern in his discussion of privacy when he observes that: "We don't want to expose ourselves completely to strangers even if we don't fear their disapproval, hostility, or disgust. Naked exposure itself, whether or not it arouses disapproval, is disqualifying. The boundary between what we reveal and what we do not, and some control over that boundary, are among the most important attributes of our humanity" (Nagel, "Concealment and Exposure," 3-4).

(i) Their outward appearance (a) is accepted as a legitimate way of presenting themselves in public spaces and (b) they are subject to the same aesthetic standards as others, and

(ii) They have access to adequate aesthetic resources to exercise a reasonable degree of control over their outward appearance as equal self-presenting persons.

Let me now conclude by addressing a potential objection to my account of the aesthetic dimensions of relational equality. According to this objection, there is a principled incompatibility between fostering inclusive and egalitarian social norms of respectable appearance, on the one hand, and ensuring that everyone has access to adequate aesthetic resources to control and shape their outward appearance, on the other. This is because, while promoting inclusive and egalitarian social norms is compatible with the ideal of relational equality, providing individuals with aesthetic resources is irreconcilable with it.

To illustrate this, consider Elizabeth Anderson's critique of luck egalitarianism. Anderson argues that luck egalitarianism disturbingly suggests that "ugly" individuals are entitled to compensation, such as publicly subsidised plastic surgery, based solely on their "repugnant appearance".[46] Therefore, luck egalitarianism reinforces demeaning judgements about public appearance, thus failing to express appropriate respect for persons. Instead, Anderson posits that a relational egalitarian society would promote inclusive norms of acceptable physical appearance, ensuring that "ugly" people are not "treated as pariahs".[47] As she puts it, "to change the person rather than the norm insultingly suggests that the defect lies in the person rather than in society. Other things equal, then, democratic equality prefers altering social norms".[48]

[46] Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?" 335.
[47] Ibid., 335.
[48] Ibid., 336. To be sure, Anderson acknowledges that, in practice, changing prevailing social norms of appearance can be very challenging and costly. Therefore, in non-ideal circumstances, providing plastic surgery to individuals who are marginalised due to their outward appearance may be justified, all things considered (Ibid., 336).

As Anderson points out, singling out individuals based on their outward appearance and offering them compensation due to their lower position within the aesthetic hierarchy is morally objectionable from a relational egalitarian perspective. However, this does not imply that providing individuals with adequate aesthetic resources is always incompatible with the ideal of relational equality. Specifically, what I am arguing is not that society should provide aesthetic resources to those individuals who fail to meet some *objective* standards of respectable appearance for the purposes of "improving" their outward appearance in ways that align with those socially acceptable standards of presentation. Rather, what I am arguing is that society should ensure that everyone has access to adequate aesthetic resources so they can shape and control, at least to some degree, their appearance *according to their own aesthetic standards*. In other words, society should ensure that everyone has access to adequate aesthetic resources, not if and because there is any inherent "defect" in an individual's outward appearance, but because everyone has a right to exercise reasonable control over their outward appearance as equal self-presenting persons. Therefore, I contend that the universal provision of adequate aesthetic resources is not only compatible with but also entailed by the ideal of relational equality.

6. Conclusion

Aesthetic appearance is a powerful source of various forms of unjust social relations, such as demeaning stereotypes, discrimination, harassment, and social exclusion. Surprisingly, however, the issue of aesthetic injustice has been largely overlooked in the relational egalitarian literature. In this paper, I contributed to this debate by examining the question of aesthetic injustice in the context of homelessness. I argued that individuals experiencing homelessness are subject to two distinct kinds of aesthetic injustice. First, they are treated as aesthetic inferiors by being regarded as disgusting elements of the urban landscape that must be rendered physically invisible in prime urban areas. Second, they are treated as aesthetic inferiors by

being deprived of the aesthetic resources necessary to control and shape how they present themselves to others.

This analysis has led to a novel account of the aesthetic dimensions of relational equality, according to which achieving relational equality requires not only fostering inclusive and egalitarian social norms of respectable appearance but also ensuring that everyone has access to adequate aesthetic resources to exercise a reasonable degree of control over their outward appearance as equal self-presenting persons.

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