

Heather Widdows

Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal

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Reviewed by Peg Brand Weiser, 2019

Peg Brand Weiser is an Emerita Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University--Indianapolis and adjunct faculty in the philosophy department and honors college at the University of Arizona. Co-author with Edward Weiser of "Misleading Aesthetic Norms of Beauty: Perceptual Sexism in Elite Women's Sports," in *Body Aesthetics*, edited by Sherri Irvin (Oxford University Press, 2016), she is editor of *Beauty Unlimited* (Indiana University Press, 2013), *Beauty Matters* (Indiana University Press, 2000), and co-editor with Carolyn Korsmeyer of *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (Penn State University Press, 1995), among other publications in feminist aesthetics, including the writing of Simone de Beauvoir.

Quote: "The beauty epidemic, cast as operating at unprecedented levels of conformity, is seen by Widdows as deluding women into thinking it will save them while it simultaneously entices them to think they are freely choosing to better themselves."

Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal offers a unique approach to an old topic, that of human beauty, written by an ethicist specializing in global ethics who considers herself "an applied philosopher" (14). It seems to be written primarily for ethicists and not--of preferred interest to this reviewer--for aestheticians, that is, those who routinely write about the value of the complex notion of beauty and its many permutations that involve ethics. Widdows admonishes moral philosophers for their surprising "lack of attention" to the contemporary beauty ideal as she aspires to bring together readers in the disciplines of cultural studies, psychology, sociology, medicine, bioethics, and law. The goal is laudatory--there is always a need for more fruitful exchange between scholars interested in the deep societal impact of contemporary beauty ideals--but the lack of acknowledgment of the philosophical subdiscipline of aesthetics weighs heavily upon the author's aim, namely, to argue that a new and unique, ever-evolving ideal of physical beauty--different from past beauty ideals--is increasingly dominant in our culture as both an ethical ideal and one in which individuals have little choice or agency. Some readers may see this book as a natural successor to the feminist critiques of Iris Marion Young, Sandra Bartky, Naomi Wolf, Susan Bordo, and Kathy Davis (Young 2005; Bartky 1990; Wolf 1990; Bordo 1993/2003; Davis 1995; Bordo 1997). It skillfully follows in this important tradition--plus it offers so much more from many diverse writers outside the philosophical tradition, revealing an explosion of research and theorizing from past decades on the modification and enhancement of the female body--as it challenges each reader to look inward at her own beauty beliefs as well as outward toward society's growing preoccupation with a pleasurable but ultimately harmful beauty ideal.

The title of the book--*Perfect Me*--is intentionally provocative; it can be interpreted as "an aspiration to become perfect; a statement about the nature of perfections; and a command, 'Perfect Me!, to be obeyed" (2-3). The author, who recently engaged in establishing a multidisciplinary "Beauty Demands Network" that was funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council--complete with workshops, website, co-authored blog, and a 2016 "Briefing Paper"--brings these field activities to bear on her written work. This is quite an unusual yet praiseworthy approach that turns feminist activism and hard-core data into philosophical argument. Is it sufficient to convince readers of the author's main thesis?

The book has ten chapters, divided roughly in half with four main arguments guiding the discussion, as outlined in the "Introduction: Beauty Matters"¹: (1) the current beauty ideal is not aesthetic but rather a dominant *ethical* ideal now understood as a moral duty; (2) the beauty ideal is new, more dominant than previous ideals, and trending toward global acceptance; (3) the power of ideal beauty lies in the self of the *flawed actual* body, which becomes the *transforming* body that holds potential, possibility, and promise to become the/an *imagined* body; and (4) as individuals, we do not choose our beauty ideals, or more precisely, we choose only the extent to which we conform to them within the overall context of the operative ideal. The first half of the book utilizes empirical evidence to bolster arguments (1) and (2), whereas the second half adopts a rigorous philosophical approach to arguments (3) and (4), particularly in chapters 7 and 8. Promotional material suggests that the book will explain "why beauty standards have shifted from a matter of taste to a moral imperative" as if the two options were exclusive; it is not clear why an ethicist would insist that to argue for the latter would necessitate a turn away from the former. Can the two not coexist, working simultaneously to inform the choices women make to conform to an ideal characterized by Widdows as a moral duty? We need to explore today's reigning beauty ideal and how it might differ from past feminine norms of appearance, for instance, those discussed by Diana Tietjens Meyers when she argued that patriarchal representations of gender constituted a hostile cultural environment inhibiting women's agency (Meyers 2002). Can Widdows be arguing that the crisis has indeed intensified over the intervening years?

In chapter 1, Widdows argues that the contemporary beauty ideal is an ethical ideal; this is the foundation for all other claims that follow. She cites the historical record, namely, Plato's insistence that beauty is tied to a path toward moral virtue and goodness, but does not follow up with any other instances from the history of aesthetics, including eighteenth-century philosophers of taste or even twentieth-century proponents of theories of beautification such as Arthur Danto, whose examples include tattoos of indigenous New Zealanders as well as hair-straightening techniques used by Malcolm X and Madame C. J. Walker (Danto 2003). To divorce beauty from its aesthetic and ethical roots that intertwine outward, physical appearance and inner, nonphysical character impairs her main argument in which she insists that "in such instances, beauty does not simply represent, but has *become* goodness. . . . Beauty then becomes *the* (ethical) ideal to aspire to and strive for. . ." (18). Beauty seen as perfection of one's face and body becomes, in her words, an ethical--and elusive--goal.

Philosophers, not generally known for invoking data, can surprise us, for instance, when philosophers of mind interested in the science of cognition use evidence from brain scans or psychological studies to bolster their claims. Widdows describes an enormous pressure for

women (and increasingly, men) to conform to stated requirements of today's beauty ideal of being thin and slim, firm and buff, smooth and luminous, young and youthful (chapter 2). Scholars from various disciplines will welcome the immense amount of data compiled here, chronicling a relentless and yet ultimately futile pursuit of the beauty ideal by *some* persons--acolytes of a beauty standard that requires continual hard work, effort, time, money, and sacrifice. Widdows is careful to demarcate only "some" women, not all, while citing impressive numbers chronicling an increase in money spent (counted in the billions of dollars or pounds) and cosmetic procedures undergone. It is somewhat difficult to assess these numbers, however, as an accurate percentage of a portion of the overall population, but the comparative analyses undeniably show that the numbers have always been rising over the span of the past few years and/or decades. More women--and younger and younger girls--dissatisfied with their bodies are increasingly spending more money on working out, makeup, makeovers, cosmetic surgeries to improve their noses and eyes, breast implants, body hair removal, manicures, botox, liposuction, labiaplasty, and other "routine" to "extreme" procedures (chapter 4). The growing trend of more types of women doing these things, more often, for longer periods of time, leads Widdows to suggest in chapter 3 "that the extension of scope is potentially global" (70). She cites international data to back up her claim.

Whether one is convinced that the beauty ideal is indeed ethical (and not just aesthetic) and that it is indeed going global is perhaps less important than the philosophical heart of the matter about how a woman who internalizes the pressure of an external ideal ends up feeling good about herself in spite of never attaining her ultimate goal. Widdows argues that a new and unprecedented elevated state of "normal" is currently operating as standard fare (chapter 5) and striving for unattainable perfection contains "hidden costs and guilty pleasures" (chapter 6). This is where the dual nature of the beauty ideal comes into play: it offers both pleasure in its pursuit and partial attainment as well as significant disappointment--even harm--both individually and communally in one's ultimate failure (chapters 7, 8, and 9). Widdows craftily examines the notions of self-objectification as compared to sexual objectification to conclude that the self who seeks beauty transitions from actual, to transformed, to imagined self, gains pleasure(s) along the way. This perpetuates the striving for perfection that is unattainable, thereby creating harm to one's self-confidence, perseverance, and self-esteem. Ultimately, Widdows asks, "More Pain, Who Gains?" in response to the slogan, "No pain, no gain" that motivates so many persons to persist and endure hardship and sacrifice while never attaining their goals (chapter 10). The beauty epidemic, cast as operating at unprecedented levels of conformity, is seen by Widdows as deluding women into thinking it will save them while it simultaneously entices them to think they are freely choosing to better themselves. But this autonomy and freedom of choice is only within controlled limits. This might be her most objectionable claim for readers who prefer to argue for more, not less, choice in terms of women's autonomy.

Only in the last five pages of the book does Widdows briefly consider suggestions for change that might alleviate the pressures of the current beauty ideal and facilitate dialogue. She suggests a collective effort rather than individual ones (why not both?) and encourages (younger) generations not to dismiss "bad old feminists" out of hand as moralistic "kill joys" who are antibeauty (259). Resisting the normalization processes of the beauty ideal is a worthwhile goal for us all, but then she adds, "If we all saw more bodies and bodies of different types, perhaps we would feel less inadequate," concluding, "I'm not sure what else can be done . . ." (259). My

suggestion would be to look to the art world where feminist artists have been resisting the beauty ideal, its norms and pressures, for at least the past fifty years. The revolution in women's art from the 1970s on by artists such as Judy Chicago, Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Cindy Sherman, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, ORLAN, Catherine Opie, and Jenny Saville--not to mention international artists contributing to "global feminisms" (Reilly and Nochlin 2007)--provides ample evidence of body types within aesthetic/ethical contexts of agentic, political resistance. Young girls might turn away from Madison Avenue advertising in creating self-absorbed selfies if they were encouraged to visit more galleries and art museums showcasing provocative feminist artwork. All in all, Widdows's concluding paragraphs contribute to a rather dull denouement of an exciting book. I recommend a more specific and workable set of recommendations found in the "Briefing Paper" issued by the Beauty Demands Network under the headings of ethical issues, psychological issues, and governance, regulatory, and legal issues.

Several other topics are worth mentioning here. First, female colleagues may fail to identify with Widdows's reasoning that within our own discipline "so many female philosophers reject the beauty ideal" because, as women, "they enter an arena where they need to succeed [so] they must become as male as possible" (267). This generalization is problematic, particularly in describing young women entering the field. It also disregards the brilliantly manipulated "looked-at-ness" of the historically noteworthy Simone de Beauvoir, who was always photographed from the 1940s to the 1980s well-dressed, coiffed, and manicured. (In this respect, Beauvoir was much like the artist Georgia O'Keeffe, who carefully crafted her visual public persona in terms of fashion, jewelry, and bodily comportment within staged settings.)

Second, who are these women who are obsessed--day and night, 365 days a year--with striving for physical beauty? And whose beauty ideal is being promoted here? As Widdows seems to isolate an ideal of white, privileged, middle-class women who can routinely afford the expense--in terms of time, effort, and money--of cosmetics, surgeries, and gym memberships, one wonders how this beauty ideal can ever be seen as "global," that is, operative for women who are economically disadvantaged, vulnerable to physical, mental, and emotional problems from a lack of adequate health care, women of color whose physical ideals clearly differ from those of women who are white, women with ethnic features inconsistent with so-called Western beauty ideals, women with impaired physical abilities (who are described as unable "to attain normal" [150]), as well as women whose physical bodies are technologically enhanced for elite athletic competition.

Third, much analysis builds upon Laura Mulvey's 1970s influential but problematic notion of "the male gaze" and a preoccupation with looking at one's physical appearance (Mulvey 2009). Widdows cites recent scholarship involving the cosmetic gaze, the surgical gaze, the forensic gaze, the narcissistic gaze, the technological gaze, but never the female gaze invoked by contemporary women filmmakers or even the decades-old racially informed oppositional gaze advanced by bell hooks and the medical gaze subverted by the self-portraits (predating selfies) of artist Mary Duffy, who, born without arms, poses herself as Venus de Milo (hooks 1992; Millett-Gallant 2010). The gazes involved with the current obsession by many (young) people with selfies leads Widdows to claim, "Thus, when they are posted and evaluated, there is a real sense in which it is the self that is being evaluated" (192); this obscures the difference between visual

representations and the objects or persons represented. In assessing such representations, just as with traditional works of art, content differs from form; it is neither new nor unique to judge portraits or self-portraits as depictions of the persons who appear. But it is problematic to collapse the aesthetic into the ethical/personal by disregarding the representation itself.

Finally, there are serious problems with this manuscript in terms of errors: missing words, misspellings, incomplete editing references, and inaccurate dates of publication. Authors are routinely quoted without introduction, making it necessary to page back and forth between the text and endnotes. One particular annoyance is the consistent misspelling of "woman" as "women." A close reading by a copy editor would have improved the text considerably.

Of course, many of us may be vulnerable to the millions of dollars spent on marketing beauty products and procedures as well as to peer pressure (although there is very little discussion about marketing; one could ask, for instance, why is succumbing to a beauty ideal any different from succumbing to the temptation to buy a pricey new car every year that will make one feel pleasure and empowerment?). *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal* is a fascinating read that may raise more questions for scholars than it answers. Within the increasingly complex realm of physical beauty and feminist challenges to a white, heterosexual, female beauty ideal, this book should inspire responses that will definitely be a worthwhile result. We can all look forward to the future discussion that considering beauty as an ethical ideal will spawn.

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¹ In full disclosure, this reviewer is mentioned in a footnote on page 1 of "Introduction: Beauty Matters," in which Widdows writes, "The title of the introduction, as well as being a claim about beauty morally mattering is a homage to Peggy Brand's *Beauty Matters* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000)."