

# beauty without the beast

conclusion of “Perfect Me” by Heather Widdows

why does beauty matter?

# why beauty matters, according to Widdows...

- it shapes our shared culture and individual practice, and it is increasingly a dominant ethical ideal (1)
  - we spend time and money on it, this requires the support of a vast number of industries (2)
- the contemporary beauty ideal implies moral judgements (2)
  - you *should* make the best of yourself
  - you *should not* let yourself go
  - you're *worth* it
  - you *deserve* it



Note: Widdows is talking about beauty narrowly defined as some sort of set of physical characteristics.

# main arguments of the book



1. The beauty ideal is an **ethical ideal** (2).
2. The contemporary beauty ideal is more dominant than previous ideals and, if this continues, **will be global** (3).
3. The **self is constructed** under the beauty ideal (3).
4. As individuals **we do not choose our beauty ideals** (4).

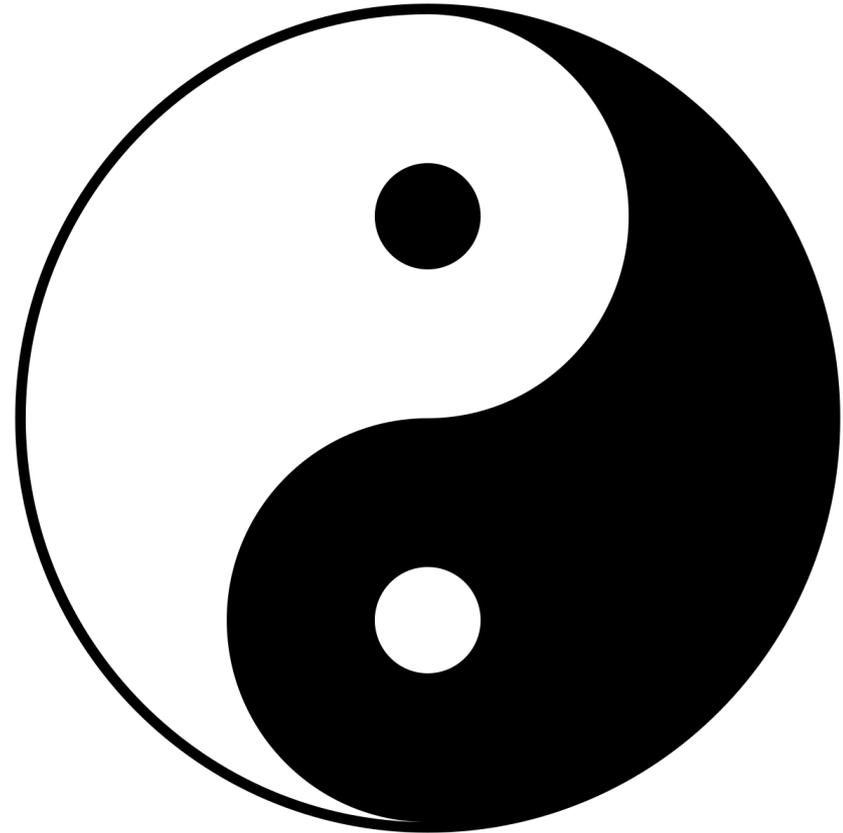
# what is the new beauty ideal?

Widdows calls her conclusion “Beauty without the Beast” because she thinks that the “new beauty ideal” has a dual nature; we should try to extend the positive aspects of beauty while pruning away the dark side.

- key to this is the the dual nature of the contemporary beauty ideal
- some aspects “enhance, respect, connect, and cherish while others criticize, humiliate, and shame.” (257)
- “Beauty objectification is not wholly harmful. It is also empowering, protective, and promising.”(256)



<b>good</b>	<b>bad</b>
broad	homogeneous
inclusive	demanding
diverse	dominant
celebratory	devastating
enhance	destructive
respect	cruel
connect	criticize
cherish	humiliate
	shame



source: pages 16, 257, 262

# key features of the new beauty ideal

broadly shakes out into four categories:

- **thinness (primary)**
  - repeated in numerous studies, manifested in a number of ways (21)
- **firm and buff**
  - important in an increasingly visual culture in which the body, especially the naked body, is a predominant image (22)
- **smooth and luminous**
  - has emerged in a context where the beauty ideal is focused on the physical face and body
  - skin should not be blemished... “the surveillant gaze” is becoming more intense, “operating at ever finer-grained levels” (24)
- **young and youthful**
  - you should not be old (26)



out with the old...



“Traditional arguments\* of coercion, adaptive preferences, gender exploitation do not capture the moral concerns of the new beauty ideal.” (255)

(\*something like Naomi Wolf’s claim in *The Beauty Myth* that beauty norms have an oppressive impact on the freedom of women? Archer & Ware 120)

- also seems to be skewed by gender.

## ...in with the new

“The current and emerging beauty ideal is different from previous ideals.” (253)

- what's different?
  - it's ethical
  - it's dominant; on the way to being globally so
  - narrowed
  - key features are different



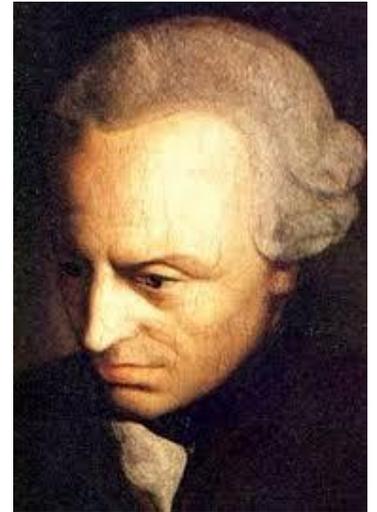
# how is the new beauty ideal ethical?

It *is* what is desired, both for itself and for the goods\* it is believed it will deliver.

\*Here I think Widdows means something like happiness and success, in addition to the fact that beauty is pleasurable both individually and communally (255)

## the ethics (5)

1. provides a value framework against which individuals judge themselves and others
2. prescribes habits and practices around which daily life is structured and ordered
3. constructs meaning and identity
4. failure invokes shame, disgust, and filth
5. the beauty ideal promises the goods of the good life



# why is beauty as an ethical ideal bad?

- harms:
  - physical
  - psychological
  - social structures
  - relationships



“We do not flourish, we are not happy” (253)

- the new beauty ideal “makes otherwise strong and independent women self-critical and vulnerable.” (ix)

There is pressure to engage in increasingly risky beauty practices (254)

Chasing the unachievable ideal uses time that could be invested into other life skills and achievements (260)--Archer and Ware make this claim too, citing Ann Cahill.

# beauty embodied

Related to Widdows' third argument (the **self is constructed**):

Embodied experience: "We are our bodies, and our bodies are ourselves" (254)



- We cannot deny the body and advocating non-engagement is not good enough (257).
  - Taylor: "racialized bodies" (10)
- We need to recognize the demands of beauty under a potentially global ethical ideal (258).
  - similar to Taylor insisting on "the social significance of race" (9)
  - "...accepting the sociopolitical significance of race positions us to understand the abiding interest in ethics... we find in the black aesthetic tradition." (10)

# her suggestions

- policy changes for advertising and beauty coverage
- improved regulation of beauty products and practices
- talking about the new beauty ideal to collectively create a less toxic environment
- challenge the narrowing of the beauty ideal by resisting normalization (increase diversity)
- focus on non-beauty attributes and skills, too
- seek to change the way we look at ourselves and others



# discussion questions

- Widdows argues that, due to technology, the beauty ideal will go on increasing (“potentially unending”). Is this a slippery slope argument?
- Plausibility of her suggestions?
  - and if implemented, do we think they will have the required effect?
- \*arguments about what? (from slide 8) Widdows spends a lot of time talking about the “new beauty ideal” but doesn’t say what it emerged from (for our class, we can put her in conversation with Archer and Ware)
- Can her arguments be extrapolated to other types of aesthetic appreciation?

shameless self-promotion: the UBC Philosophy of Consent reading group will be talking about chapter 9 of this book, “I’m Doing It for Me,” this Friday from 1-3 in this room (D324). In it, Widdows critiques the liberal model of choice and details how she thinks this new beauty ideal undermines the liberal notion of fully-informed consent.