Chapter 115
The Ethics of Seeking Body Perfection, with Continual Reference to Heidi Montag

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly visual society, beauty may seem only skin deep. This chapter considers the ethics of cosmetic surgery through the lens of posthumanism, a stance that suggests that defects of the body can be overcome through technology. Cosmetic surgery, with its reliance on prostheses and promise of reshaping the body, is, at its heart, a posthuman enterprise. Although many have engaged in cosmetic surgery, actress Heidi Montag became an exemplar of reshaping the body by undergoing ten different plastic surgery procedures in one day. Using Montag as foil, this chapter examines four ethical dimensions of cosmetic surgery: the ethics of the medical professionals who perform and advertise these procedures, the ethics of the individual making the decision, the ethics of the media structures that promote a homogenous ideal of beauty, and the ethics of those who tacitly approve of such procedures.

INTRODUCTION

In his essay "Definition of Man," Kenneth Burke (1966) described humanity as "rotten with perfection" (p. 16), an ironic observation of how people often miss the mark as they seek that perfection. Such a description seems prescient in today's cosmetically enhanced world in which teenage girls may receive breast implants or liposuction as high school graduation presents (see Cassidy, 2010). Blum (2005) argues that cosmetic surgery "holds out a technological and economic solution (if you have the money, the technology is there)

to the very dilemma posed by the way capitalism manages femininity by simultaneously commodifying it, idealizing it, and insisting on its native defects" (p. 110). Jordan (2004) likewise observes that "over the course of the last century, plastic surgery advocates have engaged in a concerted, commercial effort to redefine the human body as a plastic, malleable substance which surgeons can alter and people should want to alter in order to realize their body image ideals" (p. 328). In short, there is little that cannot be corrected; one can truly have the perfect body.

Even in cases where the ethics may seem clear, there can be controversy. For example, some portions of the deaf community have fought vehemently against cochlear implants in deaf children (for more on this controversy, see Balkany, Hodges, & Goodman, 1996; Lane & Bahan, 1998). Indeed, Murphy (2009) describes one same-sex couple who sought out a deaf sperm donor to increase the chances that their child would be deaf. The distinction between therapeutic intervention and enhancement is not always clearly delineated (Hogle, 2005). This is also the case in aesthetic enhancement. Plastic surgery is generally described as procedures used to correct some defect or disfiguration, such as in the case of birth defects or burn victims, while cosmetic surgery describes those procedures that are not medically necessary. Still, the question of what constitutes a defect and what is medically necessary can be subjective. For example, an individual may become so self-conscious of a particular bodily attribute that he or she becomes depressed or suicidal. As such, one must proceed with caution when considering the ethics of body modification and enhancement. One thing seems clear: the question of what *can* be accomplished through medical technology may be outpacing our ability as a society to answer what *should* be done.

McLuhan (1994) noted that the "outering or extension of our bodies and senses in a 'new invention' compels the whole of our bodies to shift into new positions in order to maintain equilibrium. A new 'closure' is effected in all our organs and senses, both private and public, by any new invention" (p. 252). But Graham (2002) argues that "technologies are not so much an extension or appendage to the human body, but are incorporated, assimilated into its very structures. The contours of human bodies are redrawn: they no longer end at the skin" (p. 4). The body can be shaped through technology in almost any way we wish. Such technologies have significant implications for how we as a society view the body.

Although many have gone under the knife in the pursuit of beauty, actress Heidi Montag stands out as an exemplar of this move toward cosmetic surgery as a means of recreating the body. Montag underwent 10 different plastic surgery procedures in one day, stating, "I had a little bit of Botox, an eyebrow lift, my ears tucked, I had my nose re-aligned, fat injections put into my cheeks, my lips done and I had my chin shaved down" (Berman, 2010, p. C4). Of course there is more to be done, as she heaps plastic surgery upon plastic surgery: "I would like to get my breasts redone. Because I couldn't get them the size I wanted because they couldn't fit" ("Heidi Says," 2010, p. 31). After her barrage of surgeries, she told *People* magazine: "I see an upgraded version of me. It's a new face and a new energy. It's a new person and I feel like almost all of the things I didn't want to be and who I turned into kind of got chiseled away" (Garcia, 2010, p. 84). The only way that Montag could be herself, it seems, was by removing parts of her flesh. But Montag has no intention of resting on her surgically-enhanced laurels. Says Montag, "Let's just say there's a lot of maintenance. Nobody ages perfectly, so I plan to keep using surgery to make me as perfect as I can be. Because, for me, the surgery is always so rewarding" (Garcia, 2010, p. 88).

In this chapter, I will use Heidi Montag as a lens through which to explore the ethical considerations of cosmetic surgery. I suggest that Montag and others like her draw on a posthumanist perspective, which suggests that the body is intrinsically flawed and must be corrected through technology. Montag's case illustrates four specific ethical questions: the ethics of the medical professionals who perform and advertise these procedures; the ethics of the individual making the decision; the ethics of the media structures that promote a homogenous ideal of beauty; and the ethics of those within society who tacitly approve of such procedures. Some questions that naturally arise include how, or if, such procedures should be

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