The Moral Case for 'Ban the Airbrush'

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In 2013, British retailer Debenhams uploaded an image of a model to social media website Facebook announcing that they would show their commitment to encouraging positive body-image by using un-airbrushed lingerie photography (Hawkes, 2013). Elaborating on the announcement, a spokeswoman declared to the *Daily Mail* that "we have a moral obligation to ban the airbrush" and implored other retailers to follow suit (Kirkova, 2013). Such sentiment is shared by those outside the United Kingdom, with Israel ushering what has colloquially been called the "Photoshop Law" in 2012 (Skarda, 2012) and a bill in the United States known as the "Self Esteem Act" proposed a year earlier in 2011 (Abraham, 2011). It is clear that there is a growing movement across the world to restrict the use of airbrushing in promotional material and with that an ethical debate inevitably arises: Is it ethical to drastically change how models appear through the use of editing software? Does objective beauty truly exist, or is beauty "in the eye of the beholder"? Should the government use the force of the law to ban the airbrush or should the industry be left to self-regulate? This essay intends on answering these questions, utilising statistics, philosophy and logic, avoiding the temptation (given the nature of the subject) to engage in social justice politicking that is usually found in Twitter shouting matches.

Published in the International Journal of Eating Disorders, research conducted by Microsoft found that there was a link between exposure of young people to anorexic models and the development of anorexia itself (Siegel-Itzkovich, 2013). The research entailed investigating a connection between web searches for performers regarded as anorexic and the fans of the performers searching for "how to become anorexic": Featuring anorexic models meant users were almost two times more likely to search about how to become anorexic (Siegel-Itzkovich, 2013).

In a similar vein, the BBC (Mazumdar, 2013) related a story of a 14-year old schoolgirl by the name of Jemma who aspired to be a model or an actress. She confessed that she regularly edits the "selfies" (photographs taken of oneself by oneself) before uploading it on Facebook or image-sharing website Instagram. The increase in the number of phone applications that automatically adjust, tinker and airbrush images have facilitated youngsters such as Jemma to create a personal image that is divorced from reality and proximate to their favourite celebrities portrayed on various magazine front covers. Multiplied across an entire demographic, the end result is the creation of a culture brutally dissatisfied with the smallest physical imperfection, leading to depression and other body-related anxieties. In the United States, a study conducted by Unilever (Graff, 2012) found that the number one wish of those aged between 11 and 17 is to be thinner. In addition, 75% of girls felt depressed, guilty and shameful after spending three minutes looking through a magazine (Graff, 2012).

The ramifications of this should not underestimated as being confined only to young teenage females locked in their rooms eagerly trying to be like their celebrities, but transcends sex (males are likewise affected). Indeed, the topic even transcends the issue of airbrushing itself, narrowly understood, and into the broader issue discussed among futurists called "transhumanism": The intellectual movement that seeks to advance Man beyond his natural intellectual, physiological and physical capacity. If a culture of airbrushing is pervasive, and with it necessarily intolerance to imperfection, this has important implications on the issue of Designer babies, children *in utero* diagnosed with Down's syndrome, females who base their

worth on their appearance and much more. Can we expect people to not genetically program their children if they are within a culture that has apps on their phone with the sole purpose of tinkering with their pictures before uploading it on social media? Can we expect people to raise disabled children with love if they look down upon anyone who is even marginally physically different from the celebrity in vogue? Can we expect women to consider STEM degrees at university when from adolescence they are implicitly told the only way they can make their mark on society is by uploading artificial 'selfies' on Instagram?

Perhaps more than any other issue, this is where businesses can really make their mark on society. By refraining from using the airbrush on promotional material and magazine covers, businesses can help combat depression, body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) and the low self-esteem that afflicts many people today, especially teenagers. It is arguably one of the most perfect forms of corporate social responsibility, especially for retailers and other businesses with a target audience between the ages of 11-17, in that it concerns the welfare of the very target audience they sell their products to.

Whilst the need to refrain from using the airbrush to digitally alter how models appear has been well established, the deeper philosophical debate has not been adequately dealt with: Does objective beauty truly exist, or is beauty subjective and merely "in the eyes of the beholder"?

The reason why this question must be answered is because if objective beauty does exist, then as an ideal, all human beings should strive towards it. That would vindicate businesses that airbrush models in that it would demonstrate to the target audience: "This is the physical ideal of a human being, and this is what you should strive for".

To that end, some have criticised the "Ban the Airbrush" movement on the basis that it dispels physical ambition. There are always going to be people more beautiful than others, and those who are the most beautiful should be venerated by the media and should not be hidden because someone, somewhere may develop low self-esteem. Furthermore, some argue that when the movement is taken to its most extreme form, it is detrimental to health by way of promoting complacency among those who need a change in lifestyle. An example would be with how some in the movement have embraced morbid obesity and have euphemistically replaced morbid obesity with "curvy", ignoring the various illnesses and conditions linked with obesity. Such criticism is understandable, justified and warranted, and it goes to show that the moral case for "Ban the Airbrush" cannot be adequately answered without an attempt to penetrate into the realm of aesthetics.
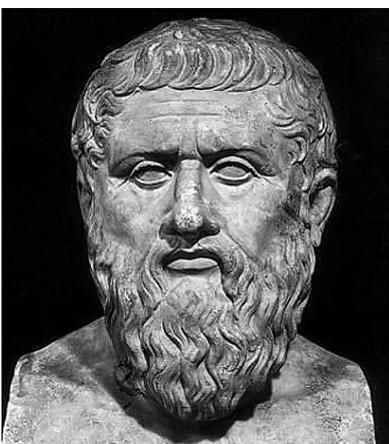
Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions relating to art and beauty (Slater, 2005). Although as a field it only developed during the 18th century due to the rise in leisure time, with German philosopher Immanuel Kant speaking about it at length, it does have a medieval and ancient precedent: Socrates, Plato (pictured in the right) and Aristotle spoke about the nature of beauty to some degree, and this likewise applies to later philosophers such as Plotinus, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas (Slater, 2005).

Plato's treatment of aesthetics is perhaps the most pertinent in making the case for the need to reform the use of the airbrush in promotional material. According to Plato, there exists a transcendental world called the world of "Forms" (Pappas, 2008), where everything true really exists, such as Love, Justice and relevantly, Beauty. The world around us is a mere semblance of the world of Forms, and we should all strive to reach the world of Forms where reality fundamentally exists. This was explained in his famous Allegory

of the Cave (Cohen, 2006), where there exists prisoners chained in a cave and unable to turn their heads. All the prisoners can see is the wall of the cave, and a fire behind them is burning. Puppeteers hold up puppets, which casts shadows onto the wall which the prisoners are looking at. As the prisoners are unable to turn their heads nor are they able to see the puppets, they mistake the shadows of the puppets for being how puppets really look like, and the muffled sound of the puppeteers. One prisoner eventually finds himself freed from the chains in the cave (Clowney, n.d.). Upon venturing outside of the cave, he finds himself in full view of the Sun, and he comes to understand reality and how everything that he saw in the Cave was a semblance of reality. Unlike Plato, the Ban the Airbrush movement seeks to go further: To take the majority of "prisoners" (those who are being deceived by airbrushing), as opposed to a measly one, out of the Cave to realise that what is being presented by many businesses as "Beauty" is not an accurate representation of reality.

It is because of Plato's metaphysics (his view about what constitutes reality and being) that he strongly condemned art. Whilst Plato saw Beauty as the highest form of good existing in a transcendental world, he believed that art was a poor representation of this because of its power to evoke strong emotions as well as to distract. Artists tend to engage in imitating the Form of Beauty, or what Plato called "mimesis". In his *The Republic*, he thus recommended that in his ideal society, art would be strictly prohibited (Clowney, n.d.). In a similar manner, the Ban the Airbrush movement realises the danger that airbrushed material poses to society, especially teenagers, and thus seeks to restrict the use of airbrushing.

Where this essay diverges from Plato's astute philosophical observations is that it doesn't go as far as Plato did in his recommendations, and differs with Plato in where Beauty is truly found. In those cases where this essay does not conform to Plato's aesthetic views, it follows the aesthetics implicitly put forward by Aristotle and those of his disciples.

Aristotle was a student of Plato, who, like his teacher, profoundly influenced Western philosophy. Aristotle's view on aesthetics differed from that of Plato in that Aristotle did not see art as harmful to society as Plato imagined (Cacioppe, 2001). On the contrary, Aristotle believed that art was helpful in conveying certain truths. That is a relevant position here in responding to criticism that the Ban the Airbrush movement seeks to glorify obesity and deplores people aspiring to improve their physical appearance. The Ban the Airbrush movement should not go as far as Plato did in campaigning to end the publication of all promotional material, or indeed even all retouching. What the Ban the Airbrush movement should campaign against is airbrushing that presents an impossible or unhealthy image to attain.

On the question of whether objective beauty truly exists, Aristotle disagreed with the position advanced by Plato that true Beauty can only be found in a transcendental, ethereal world. Aristotle maintained that something in the created order of the world could also be considered beautiful if it exhibited symmetry, harmony and definiteness (Armstrong, 2014).

Objective beauty does exist, and this appears to be the consensus not only between Plato and Aristotle, but among a number of other philosophers, ranging from St. Augustine, to St. Thomas Aquinas (Spicher, 2010) and further down the history of philosophical thought to Immanuel Kant (Burnham, 2005).

Given that objective beauty does exist, it is not morally reprehensible for businesses and retailers to use aesthetically pleasing models to showcase their products. Indeed, a case could be made that it is morally commendable, as it implicitly gives society an ideal to aspire to, and encourages people to look after their appearance.

Nor can retouching, in itself, be considered immoral or detrimental to society. Retouching art is not a new phenomenon; it has occurred since time immemorial, with the Ancient Egyptians portraying their kings in ostentatious regalia to denote power to a 1533 painting of German Protestant theologian Martin Luther (Cranach, 1533) showing the former monk to be healthier than he actually was. This does not appear to be incongruous with Aristotle. For if Aristotle maintained that "history represents things as they are, while fiction represents them as they might be and ought to be" (Saint-Andre, 2009), how much more does that apply to art?

There are many ways in which the use of graphical retouching and airbrushing can be reformed so that youngsters can grow up with a healthy and positive body-image, which would reduce the incidence of anorexia and other body dysmorphic disorders; in its place, it would boost self-esteem and confidence. Some have argued that there needs to be recourse to government regulation to stop the abuse of airbrushing, and this has been done in countries such as Israel (Siegel-Itzkovich, 2013). This could be done in the UK by Parliament passing an Act that either outright bans the airbrush tool, or requires those using airbrushed models to clearly state so on the image itself. However, this essay is of the opinion that it is preferable that the industry is left to form its own code of ethics on the use of the airbrush tool and to what extent a model's image should be retouched. This is because "ethics", strictly speaking, requires freedom of choice to choose between good and evil and cannot be imposed by someone else.

Akin to the Turing Test, named after computer scientist Alan Turing to test if a machine can display intelligent behaviour that would make it indistinguishable from a human being such that it could fool others that it is a human being, a test should be proposed in the industry called the "Debenhams Test" after retailing store Debenhams who is the most prominent retailing firm to date to announce its restriction of the use of the airbrush tool on images of its model. The Debenhams Test would require that the industry adheres to the following principle: If the image of the model appears substantially different from the model in reality, it ought not to be used. Like the Turing Test, this would mean asking a panel of randomly selected individuals if the person portrayed in the retouched image is the same person as the person in the un-retouched image. To further underscore the credibility of the test, the retouched and un-retouched images of models could be mixed together with images of twins. If a certain number of people disagree, with the percentage to be determined by the industry itself, then the image should not be used. In using the Debenhams Test, the airbrushing tool can prevent the abuse of art that so troubled Plato he proposed it should be banned. The airbrush tool, in light of the Debenhams Test, seeks a *via media*, or mid-way, between the views of Plato and Aristotle: As an image, it does not distort reality so much that it conforms to Plato's *mimesis*, and on the other hand it permits the retouching of images so that it is not merely historic in representing things as they are but fictional in how things ought to be, as Aristotle said (Saint-Andre, 2009).

The Debenhams Test would prevent digital artists from using the airbrush tool to create a "perfect face" that does not correspond to the reality of the person being graphically edited. It is one thing to remove minor wrinkles and something else to change the contours of a model's face. Yet the Debenhams Test alone is not sufficient. Whilst it prevents digital artists from drastically altering a person's face such that they become unrecognisable from the original person, it is silent on the issue of changing a person's body proportions. A person can still be recognised even if the airbrush tool has been used to make their waist slimmer; given that this is the case, a major abuse of the airbrush tool completely evades the Debenhams Test.

One solution to this insufficiency of the Debenhams Test would be for the industry to include in its code of ethics that the use of retouching to make a model slimmer and skinnier than

she actually is, or to enhance the prominence of a male model's abdomen, clearly states that the final image has been graphically edited and does not represent the actual model being depicted. It would be equivalent to the law passed by Israel's legislature with the only difference being that this code of ethics emerged out of the goodwill of retailers and other British businesses and was not imposed by the government.

However, even when both the Debenhams Test and a voluntary code of ethics that requires retailing companies to state when a model's image has been graphically edited is included, it still does not go far enough. The reason for that is because retailing firms could easily use a beautiful or handsome model and pass through the Debenhams Test as well as comply with the voluntary code of ethics. But sole usage of an aesthetically pleasing model can likewise, although to a lesser degree than airbrushed models, give the impression that society is comprised of hunks or babes. It ignores the military veteran who lost his limb in battle, or the child with Down's Syndrome, or the person with vitiligo, or the aged woman. All of the aforementioned people with their varying conditions are just as much a part of society as hunks or babes, and are equal in terms of human worth.

It is therefore the opinion of this essay, following Sainsbury's inclusion of Natty Goleniowska (a seven year old girl with Down's Syndrome) into its clothing campaign (Marsh, 2014), that firms should show an open-mindedness to featuring those in positions that deviate from the norm. It does not go as far as recommending that firms feature such people X times a month, in which case it becomes a quota which is morally deplorable. But to feature a military veteran with amputated limbs (for example), in those cases it is possible and relevant, will challenge viewers and probe them to look beneath the surface. Christ Himself, after all, is still depicted in art triumphantly displaying His wounds.

The need to reform the use of the airbrush tool cannot be underestimated. Its use has hitherto contributed to anorexia and related anxieties, affecting teenage girls in particular; its proper reformation will boost self-esteem whilst still enabling people to aspire to improve their appearance. The Debenhams Test and a voluntary code of ethics that states all images graphically edited considerably must be labelled as such in addition to an open-mindedness to feature those classed as different from the norm is the best path for the Ban the Airbrush movement.

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