I am not a philosopher, but it seems to me that Dr. Thomas Daley is being confronted by the excesses which are legally and ethically permitted in his profession. Although they do other surgeries as well, many plastic surgeons are involved in modifying a healthy human body to conform to cultural standards of beauty or "normality." Dr. Daley had no problem performing the rhinoplasty to change Kelly's nose when she was 11. At that point, he seemed to believe that if the patient (and her mother) desired it, it was entirely ethical to use surgery to "correct" a naturally occurring characteristic in order for Kelly to develop greater confidence and popularity. When Kelly Patterson wanted a smaller nose, he created one for her.

Now that she wants larger breasts, though, he is less sure. What's the difference? One has to do with the risks which, judging from the evidence here and what I've read elsewhere, are considerably greater with breast augmentation than with rhinoplasty. But I wonder if another difference is one of limits. Dr. Daley must be wondering, after breast augmentation, will it be a buttock trim? And after that, if Kelly finds her midline a little too thick, a tummy tuck? Is it ethical to support a patient's belief in the inadequacy of her own body by continuing to modify it with a knife? Where does this end?

Another issue involved here relates to the "ethical" standards in the region in which Dr. Daley practices medicine. His colleagues apparently do not choose to perform breast augmentations on teenaged girls, while those of Dr. Carlson do.

I believe that the questions raised by this case study are less ethical than cultural ones. Why didn't Dr. Daley encourage Kelly and her mother to examine their assumptions about the inverse relationship between large noses, small breasts, and popularity? Would Barbara Streisand have been a more popular singer and actress if she had had a nose job? Would Gwyneth Paltrow be a more successful actress if she has a breast augmentation? What important – and attractive – qualities does an
individual develop when she accepts her uniqueness? This conversation apparently never took place in Dr. Daley’s office because for him, at least, they weren’t relevant questions. He is a plastic surgeon. For him, and for many of his patients, even quite young patients, cosmetic plastic surgery is a legitimate and ethical way to deal with feelings of inadequacy or lack of attractiveness. Now that he has to confront the logical extension of the practice of his profession, though, he balks.

He can either perform the surgery himself and squelch his qualms, or let Kelly and her mother seek another surgeon. I don’t think he is more or less ethical by performing the surgery, unless he violates his personal sense of limits. As Dr. Carlson reminds him, he doesn’t have to do that.

This case brings to mind the larger question of where do ethical standards come from? It seems to me that they’re derived, at least in part, from the norms agreed upon by a particular culture in a particular time and place. I personally find Kelly and her mother’s choices ridiculous and not a little sad. But I don’t find them unethical in twenty-first century America. As a culture, we have answered the question asked in this study. The result, in case any of us forgets, can be seen in Michael Jackson’s face.