

Overcoming Objectification

A Carnal Ethics

Ann J. Cahill

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To Neil
and all the wondrous ways
he works for peace

Preface

In some philosophical circles, particularly those engaged with questions of sex, gender, and identity, a somewhat remarkable shift has occurred. The modern model of the autonomous, rational, disembodied self has been rejected; in its place stands a self marked by its own materiality, a self always and already embedded in a web of contexts and relationships. The body, as the site of difference and intersection, has been recognized as central to the processes of becoming that mark human subjects, rather than as a peripheral and sometimes obstructionist force that the disembodied soul or will must control. Flesh no longer stands in for passivity, or a regrettable association with the non-human world, but constitutes an openness to the other, a medium of transformation, and yes, a vulnerability without which subjects cannot come into being.

Given the radically challenging nature of this shift, it is not surprising to note that philosophical treatments of embodiment and intersubjectivity have continued to proliferate in recent decades. It is equally unsurprising to discover that there remain areas of inquiry not yet sufficiently transformed by the model of the incarnate, situated, sexually/racially/geographically (etc.) marked subject. My philosophical interests center on these areas, particularly those that concern gender equality. Most broadly, my work seeks to answer the following questions: What happens to philosophical theories when subjectivity is oriented around the body? What flaws in previous theories show up? What new theoretical possibilities emerge? Most fascinating to me are bedrock concepts or approaches in feminist theory, those that have become central to feminist philosophizing but that have not necessarily been considered in relationship to relatively new theories regarding the body, the other, and the self. My role so far in feminist theory, then, has been that of a re-visitor: I explore that which has become familiar or assumed, seeking to reshape that territory by deploying relatively new conceptual tools. Such reshaping, I hope, results in insights that further clarify the ways in which sex/gender inequality shapes contemporary culture and the lives of those who inhabit it.

In my first book (Cahill 2001), I took on the problem of sexual violence,

and argued that positioning the body at the center of the experience of rape revealed flaws in existing feminist theories, while also helping to illuminate its particular harms and ethical wrongs. Now I turn my attention to the notion of sexual objectification, highlighting the tensions between the assumptions underlying it and the model of an embodied, intersubjective self. In some ways, the questions that have spurred this exploration are simple: if materiality is central to identity, then how can being treated as a “thing” be necessarily degrading? If intersubjectivity is similarly central to identity, then why is being the passive recipient of an active gaze necessarily dehumanizing? When previous feminist approaches have criticized sexual objectification as a means of oppressing women, they tended to offer alternatives—that is, ostensibly ethical ways of relating to other persons—that seemed to be distinctly disembodied. Ethical sexual interactions were to be marked by a recognition of interior worth or dignity, grounded in a respect for an autonomy warranted by the capacity for reason, with little to no attention paid to distinctly carnal dynamics. Such a move even trickled down into common discourse, where it was and is exemplified by exhortations to love the “inside” of the person and consider the “outside” to be irrelevant or meaningless.

These alternatives implicitly, perhaps unknowingly, adopted a modern conceptualization of the self, one that considered the body to be inherently inferior to the mind/soul. Ethics became characterized as the ability to look “beyond” flesh, to refrain from considering a person’s bodily specificity as grounds for differentiated treatment, to remember that inside, we’re all the same. Being treated as a mere body—in a strikingly evocative phrase, as a “piece of meat”—was to be harmed and degraded, because what was morally relevant about being a person, what really counted, was both absent in and opposed to the body.

Developing such an ethical framework was not without its positive effects. Using the concept of sexual objectification, feminism rightly deplored many common social phenomena that are deeply harmful to women. However, any sexual ethics worth its mettle cannot place itself in direct opposition to the body and its importance to the human self. The conceptual baggage that accompanied objectification served to inhibit feminism’s ability to articulate a positive, embodied sexual ethics that neither marginalized nor vilified materiality. The flaws inherent in this approach demonstrate a need for a complex and nuanced understanding of what it means to be a sexual intersubject: a self made up of flesh and bone, drives and dynamics, whose very being is intricately and irrevocably intertwined with the being of others. Such an understanding can only be developed when the bodily aspects of existence are brought to the conceptual fore.

Doing precisely that, I argue in this work, will ultimately demonstrate that the analytical tool of sexual objectification has outlived its usefulness. That it has been a philosophical workhouse is without doubt; that

the phenomena it has illuminated remain problematic is, in my mind, clear. But feminism cannot afford to offer critiques that ultimately, if unintentionally, require women to become alienated from their embodied existence. Such critiques leave unspeakable and incoherent the ways in which being treated as a body, as an incarnate and carnal subject, are not only not degrading, but deeply pleasurable. To put it another way: precisely because the human self is embodied, and precisely because the human self is intersubjective, it is unsurprising that the experience of being (or being seen as) a sex object—a bodily being whose material appearance arouses the sexual interest of another—can be enhancing to one's sense of self. When sexual objectification is defined entirely negatively, such experiences are either rejected as examples of false consciousness or framed as unfortunate vestiges of internalized misogyny. Instead, they need to be understood as often crucial elements to a flourishing sense of self.

That sexual objectification can be self-enhancing does not indicate that all the phenomena that have been analyzed using it are necessarily positive, either for women specifically or for culture as a whole. Prostitution, the ways in which women's bodies are portrayed in dominant media, the construction of hegemonic heterosexuality—these all present serious ethical questions. However, they must be analyzed in such a way that does not deny materiality or frame it as necessarily opposed to ethical ways of being. In other words, the fact that human beings are embodied, that they exist as material entities persistently marked by their interactions with others, cannot show up as itself an ethical problem that must be overcome. To the contrary: the sheer inescapability of both the body and the other can serve as a ground for ethics.

What is needed, then, are new conceptual tools that parse phenomena such as sex work or relationship violence within the context of a recognition of embodied intersubjectivity. In this work I offer one such tool: "derivatization," a concept grounded in the reality of an embodied sexual difference. As a mode of ethical analysis, derivatization problematizes not materiality, but a kind of ontological reductionism, by which one subject is reduced to the being of another. Such a reduction, I argue, violates the individual's ontological distinctiveness—a distinctiveness that is both a product and ingredient of a flourishing intersubjectivity.

As a conceptual tool, derivatization performs two crucial functions. First, it reframes the ethical and political phenomena usually associated with objectification in new and more philosophically tenable ways. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it can serve to ground a positive model of ethical sexual behavior that does not ignore or reject the relevance of the body. In fact, adopting an ideal of non-derivatization demands the recognition of the bodily particularity of the other. The inside/outside dichotomy is thus successfully dismantled: identity is understood as marked by the materiality of the body, and so to pay attention to the body of the other (crucially, in a mode of Irigarian wonder)

can be a profoundly affirming act. Sexual objectification as a concept assumes that the primary wrong of several kinds of unethical sexual interactions is to be found in mistaking a person for a thing; derivatization, in contrast, recognizes that persons are in fact material entities. Unethical sexual interactions involve not the mistaking of persons for things, but the failure to recognize the embodied other as radically distinct from the self. Wonder, and ethical sexual interactions, necessitate alterity—and both wonder and alterity are noticeably absent from the current construction of hegemonic heterosexuality. It is that absence that accounts for the unethical aspects of a variety of social phenomena associated with women's bodies, not the bodies themselves.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The book begins with a consideration of how feminist thinkers have utilized the concept of objectification, taking the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Catharine MacKinnon as paradigmatic examples. I then move on to consider three thinkers who moved beyond merely utilizing the term to developing detailed analyses of it: Linda LeMoncheck, Martha Nussbaum, and Rae Langton. Whereas these three theories of objectification differ in some crucial ways, all, I argue, remain dependent upon a Kantian model of the person, a model that serves to marginalize the body and privilege non-embodied attributes, such as rationality and autonomy. The Kantian legacy is not a happy one, as it renders such theories incapable of sufficiently accounting for the ways in which embodied experiences, including sexual experiences, can actually serve to enhance a flourishing sense of self. Similarly, given their emphasis on the ethical value of autonomy, none of these approaches can address the ways in which subjects are shaped by interactions of all sorts (again, including sexual interactions). Finally, the emphasis on the “thingness” of “sex objects”—in other words, that to treat a woman as a sex object is to treat her as a thing-for-sex—does not sufficiently explain some paradigmatic examples of sexual objectification, which portray women not as inanimate objects, but as lively, emoting (if oversimplified) persons. For all of these reasons, I argue that the notion of objectification, as it has been understood up to this point in feminist thought, is philosophically outdated. However, the problematic social and political phenomena that have been understood in terms of objectification remain. To arrive at a philosophically coherent, feminist critique of them, new concepts are necessary.

The second chapter develops my concept of derivatization. Grounding my analysis in the theories of Luce Irigaray, as well as other theorists who have adopted a model of embodied intersubjectivity, I claim that to be considered or treated as a body is not in itself harmful, precisely because

subjects are bodies. Nor is being the passive recipient of an active gaze necessarily damaging: to be intersubjective is to be open (even vulnerable) to the attention, acts, and being of the other. What is harmful—and what in fact is occurring in virtually all situations previously described as “objectification”—is reducing one subject to a mere reflection of another subject’s needs or desires, that is, making one being into a derivative of another. Such a reduction violates the Irigarian principle of wonder, and denies the alterity between and among subjects that is central to ethical interaction. The problem, then, is not that Western culture on the whole portrays and treats women as things. The problem is that Western culture portrays and treats women as nothing more than the projection of (allegedly) masculine desires, and so fails to recognize women’s ontological specificity. Because this notion of derivatization is grounded in a theory of the embodied, intersubjective self, it avoids many of the theoretical difficulties presented by objectification. In addition, as later chapters will demonstrate, it proves more efficacious in analyzing the ethical wrongs presented by a variety of political and social phenomena often analyzed using the concept of objectification.

It is, of course, no accident that the term “sex object” refers almost (but not quite) exclusively to feminine bodies. In the Chapter 3, I explore questions of the objectification and/or derivatization of the distinctly masculine body, and argue that whereas masculine bodies can in fact be sexually objectified (as the term is usually understood), such sexual objectification carries meanings that are importantly different (and, in fact, less harmful) than the meanings associated with the sexual objectification of feminine bodies. I also claim that even when masculine bodies are presented as sexual—held up as appropriate objects of a sexualizing gaze—they are virtually never sexually derivatized. For this and other reasons, I caution against an overly quick and usually false assumption that either sexual objectification or sexual derivatization functions in similar ways when applied to differently sexed/gendered bodies (an assumption that previous theories of objectification did not sufficiently criticize).

Chapter 4 takes up the ethical problem of the construction of certain kinds of women as, by definition, unsexual and not sexually attractive. As it turns out, there are many categories of women that fit that definition (the religious, for example, or the overweight). I will consider just two such categories—women who are mothers and women who are disabled—which, although obviously not mutually exclusive, help to illuminate the different ways in which *not* being subject to the sexualizing gaze can be harmful to one’s sense of self. The two categories are compelling in the different ways in which they are constructed in terms of social gazes: the ubiquity of the maternal body stands in striking contrast to virtually complete absence of disabled bodies. Thus the kinds of attention that these bodies receive is quite dissimilar, although both are almost constantly desexualized. That not being perceived as a sex object can itself

be dehumanizing is an insight that current conceptions of objectification cannot explain: another indication of their philosophical untenability.

The final two chapters consider two social and political phenomena that have often been analyzed in relation to sexual objectification. Chapter 5 tackles an ongoing controversy in feminist thought: the ethical debate surrounding sex work. The debate is framed (and, I argue, virtually paralyzed) by two polarizing approaches. One insists that sex work is always and inherently oppressive to women, and is therefore unethical, whereas the other asserts that women who engage in sex work do so as full agents, and should not be reduced to victims in the context of feminist thought. I will argue that at least a significant portion of the responsibility for this stalemate rests with a shared dependence upon the notion of objectification. As a conceptual alternative, derivatization sheds considerable light on the social and political meanings of sex work. Although I refrain from supporting any particular legal approach to the phenomenon, I do hold that the vast majority of sex work in our current culture demands the adoption of a derived sexuality, and as such is harmful to women.

Chapter 6 revisits the topic of my first full-length work, sexual violence. I return to the work of Susan Brownmiller and Catharine MacKinnon, arguing here that the different ways in which sexual objectification can be understood highlights the weaknesses inherent in their theories. Understanding sexual violence as an example of sexual objectification, I claim, misrepresents many of its harms and meanings. I then develop an analysis of sexual violence as derivatization, an analysis that more clearly and accurately describes this complex and damaging phenomenon.

Finally, I conclude the book with a direct consideration of a theme that has run through many of the chapters, namely, the ways in which derivatization can function as the groundwork for a positive sexual ethics.

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This book has, of course, been some years in the making, and it has benefited from the insights and constructive critiques of many friends and colleagues. Various versions of the chapters were presented at the meetings of the Eastern Society for Women in Philosophy, and were significantly improved by the thoughtful responses of the conference attendees. I am also indebted to the Association for Feminist Ethics and Social Theory (FEAST), a lively community of feminist scholars, as well as the three anonymous readers who provided reviews of the volume for Routledge. Responding to their questions and comments improved the quality of this work significantly.

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I learned how to argue having dinner around an oval teak table with eight siblings and two parents who didn't let me get away with much—you had to make your point clearly and quickly, and be ready for a challenge. You also had to be willing to laugh at yourself. The profession of philosophy could learn a lot from a table like that.

My deepest well of gratitude is reserved for those who live with me as I read, and write, and think. I can do all of these things only because I have a partner who understands the scholar's need for regular self-cloistering, and who is willing to school two small children in that understanding. That in and of itself would be sufficient grounds for my thankfulness—but to emerge from the study and be greeted by three interesting and loving beings, well, that's the icing on the cinnamon roll. When it comes to being-with, Neil, Anne Joy, and Seannie are my favorite compatriots.

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1 Troubling Objectification

Among the many indispensable concepts associated with feminist theory, objectification holds a privileged position. The claim that patriarchy renders women things, thus robbing them of a host of qualities central to personhood—moral agency, self-worth, autonomy, to name a few—connects a disparate group of social realities that otherwise might remain conceptually separate. Paradigmatic examples of objectification (the phenomenon of sexual violence, or hypersexualized representations of women's bodies, or the ways in which reproductive technology is organized and experienced) clarify ways in which women are constructed as inferior to men, and provide compelling arguments for the need for gender equality.

Such a theoretical cornerstone demands careful analysis. Yet, as I note later, objectification *per se* has received surprisingly little attention by feminist thinkers. Although often deployed, it is rarely considered directly and in depth, an omission that I hope to rectify. In this chapter, I will explore and critique the notion of objectification as it has been utilized in feminist scholarship. That critique will uncover crucial conceptual weaknesses that undermine objectification's ability to ground feminist politics, ethics, and action.

To begin, one must distinguish between feminist theorists who utilize the concept of objectification and those who analyze it directly and at some length. The latter group, as already mentioned, is surprisingly small. In contrast, the number of feminist thinkers who have employed the notion of objectification (without explicitly and in some detail articulating its meanings), particularly in the field of ethics, is enormous. For the sake of clarity and convenience, I will focus here on two representatives of this large group, Simone de Beauvoir and Catharine MacKinnon, with the aim of building a general understanding of how this concept has functioned in some foundational feminist texts, before proceeding on to the detailed analyses that have been produced by Linda LeMoncheck, Martha Nussbaum, and Rae Langton.