

# Overcoming Objectification

A Carnal Ethics

**Ann J. Cahill**



Routledge Research in Gender and Society

## Overcoming Objectification

**Routledge Research in Gender and Society**

**1. Economics of the Family and Family Policies**

Edited by Inga Persson and Christina Jonung

**2. Women's Work and Wages**

Edited by Inga Persson and Christina Jonung

**3. Rethinking Households**

An Atomistic Perspective on European Living Arrangements

Michel Verdon

**4. Gender, Welfare State and the Market**

Thomas P. Boje and Arnlaug Leira

**5. Gender, Economy and Culture in the European Union**

Simon Duncan and Birgit Pfau Effinger

**6. Body, Femininity and Nationalism**

Girls in the German Youth Movement 1900–1934

Marion E. P. de Ras

**7. Women and the Labour-Market**

Self-employment as a Route to Economic Independence

Vani Borooh and Mark Hart

**8. Victoria's Daughters**

The Schooling of Girls in Britain and Ireland 1850–1914

Jane McDermid and Paula Coonerty

**9. Homosexuality, Law and Resistance**

Derek McGhee

**10. Sex Differences in Labor Markets**

David Neumark

**11. Women, Activism and Social Change**

Edited by Maja Mikula

**12. The Gender of Democracy**

Citizenship and Gendered Subjectivity

Maro Pantelidou Maloutas

**13. Female Homosexuality in the Middle East**

Histories and Representations

Samar Habib

**14. Global Empowerment of Women**

Responses to Globalization and Politicized Religions

Edited by Carolyn M. Elliott

**15. Child Abuse, Gender and Society**

Jackie Turton

**16. Gendering Global Transformations**

Gender, Culture, Race, and Identity

Edited by Chima J. Korieh and Philomina Ihejirika-Okeke

**17. Gender, Race and National Identity**

Nations of Flesh and Blood

Jackie Hogan

**18. Intimate Citizenships**

Gender, Sexualities, Politics

Elżbieta H. Oleksy

**19. A Philosophical Investigation of Rape**

The Making and Unmaking of the Feminine Self

Louise du Toit

**20. Migrant Men**

Critical Studies of Masculinities and the Migration Experience

Edited by Mike Donaldson, Raymond Hibbins, Richard Howson and Bob Pease

**21. Theorizing Sexual Violence**

Edited by Renée J. Heberle and Victoria Grace

**22. Inclusive Masculinity**

The Changing Nature of Masculinities

Eric Anderson

**23. Understanding Non-Monogamies**

Edited by Meg Barker and Darren Langdrige

**24. Transgender Identities**

Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity

Edited by Sally Hines and Tam Sanger

**25. The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa**

Henriette Gunkel

**26. Migration, Domestic Work and Affect**

A Decolonial Approach on Value and the Feminization of Labor

Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez

**27. Overcoming Objectification**

A Carnal Ethics

Ann J. Cahill

**Overcoming Objectification**

A Carnal Ethics

**Ann J. Cahill**



**Routledge**

Taylor & Francis Group

NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2011  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016  
Simultaneously published in the UK  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa  
business*  
This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2011.

To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection  
of thousands of eBooks please go to  
[www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk)

© 2011 Taylor & Francis

The right of Ann J. Cahill to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in  
accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.  
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in  
any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter  
invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or  
retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

**Trademark Notice:** Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered  
trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to  
infringe.

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Cahill, Ann J.

Overcoming objectification : a carnal ethics / Ann J. Cahill.

p. cm. — (Routledge research in gender and society ; 27)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Sex role. 2. Women—Identity. 3. Women—Sexual behavior.

4. Sex (Psychology) I. Title.

HQ1075.C34 2011

306.7082—dc22

2010023373

ISBN 0-203-83584-0 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN13: 978-0-415-88288-0 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-83584-5 (ebk)

## Contents

Preface

viii

**1**

Troubling Objectification

1

**2**

Derivatization

32

**3**

Masculine Sex Objects

56

**4**

Unsexed Women

84

**5**

Objectification and/in Sex Work

106

**6**

Sexual Violence and Objectification

127

Conclusion: Feeling Bodies

143

Notes

159

References

167

Index

177

## 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 Irigaray's 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; derivativization, 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 Irigarayan 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 statement 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.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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.

I am grateful to all the members of the philosophy department at Elon University, past and present—Nim Batchelor, Stephen Bloch-Schulman, Abigail Doukhan, Martin Fowler, Elsebet Jegstrup, Yoram Lubling, John Sullivan, and Anthony Weston—for creating a remarkably collegial and vibrant work community, and for wholeheartedly supporting my research agenda. Not every feminist philosopher is so lucky!

The Faculty Research and Development Committee at Elon University has supported this project with numerous summer fellowships and a sabbatical, without which I could not have completed it. I am deeply grateful for that support. Pam Kiser, interim dean of Elon College, the College of the Arts and Sciences at Elon University, generously provided funding so that I could hire a research assistant, Maggie Castor, for the final preparation of the manuscript. Maggie's close and careful reading of the final version of the manuscript was invaluable, and I thank her for checking every comma and chasing down every citation. Most importantly, I thank her for finding the title!

### [Chapter 6](#)

, "Sexual Violence and Objectification," was published with only slight modifications in *Theorizing Sexual Violence* (Routledge, 2009), edited by Renée Heberle and Victoria Grace. It is reprinted here with kind permission of the publisher and the editors.

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.