Overcoming Objectification

A Carnal Ethics

Ann J. Cahill

Routledge Research in Gender and Society

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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 phenomenona 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 stalement 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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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.

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.

OBJECTIFICATION IN ACTION: BEAUVOIR AND MACKINNON

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1974) articulated an existential feminist approach that described how women's lived experiences and opportunities had been limited by virtue of her status as inessential other to the true human, man.[1] Throughout the work, Beauvoir consistently contrasts man's opportunities for transcendence—the ability to work on and transform the material world, to choose, to respond proactively and efficaciously to the world into which one is thrown—to woman's prison of immanence. That prison, as it turns out, is a distinctly bodily one. Woman's situation, according to Beauvoir, is virtually always framed in terms of bodily demands and concerns that preclude her from the aspirations of a proper human subject. From childhood to sexual maturation to maternity, women's possibilities are constantly stunted by her materiality, and the materiality of others, which conspires to keep her confined to the world of flesh.

The degree to which that immanence is only socially required, as opposed to biologically determined, is not always clear in Beauvoir's analysis. Here, for example, she clearly names woman's status as object as a consequence of external oppression:

> Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (*conscience*) which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential.
>
> (1974, xxxiii–xxxiv; italics in the original)

At other points in the text, however, Beauvoir seems to admit that woman is more connected to materiality, to flesh, than man due to biological and not cultural forces:

> And likewise it is quite true that woman—like man—is a being rooted in nature; she is more enslaved to the species than is the male, her animality is more manifest; but in her as in him the given traits are taken on through the fact of existence, she belongs also the human realm.
>
> (1974, 288)

Certainly Beauvoir's reading of pregnancy and childbirth as inherently passive seems to question the possibility of a feminine subjectivity that encompasses such experiences:

> The transcendence of the artisan, of the man of action, contains the element of subjectivity; but in the mother-to-be the antithesis of subject and object ceases to exist; she and the child with which she is swollen make up together an equivocal pair overwhelmed by life. Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a stock-pile of colloids, an incubator, an egg; she scares children proud of their young, straight bodies and makes young people titter contemptuously because she is a human being, a conscious and free individual, who has become life's passive instrument.
>
> (1974, 553)

For the purposes of this discussion, however, distinguishing between the biological and the political causes of woman's immanence is not entirely necessary. What is relevant are the insistent connections, for Beauvoir, among woman's inferiority to man, her status as other, and her status as flesh. To become a woman necessitates becoming a sex object; but to become a sex object necessitates the abdication of that which promises human subjectivity, the transcendence of flesh and the adopting of an active position vis-à-vis the world. The woman is thus faced with an impossible situation: the very process of maturation, particularly sexual maturation, requires that she abandon the limited autonomy she has enjoyed until now and define herself as object, as thing, as passivity.

> Not only is she torn, like her brothers, though more painfully, between the past and the future, but in addition a conflict breaks out between her original claim to be subject, active, free, and, on the other hand, her erotic urges and the social pressure to accept herself as passive object.
>
> (1974, 376)

For Beauvoir, objectification is the primary means by which woman becomes defined as inessential other, and thus as inferior. Flesh and materiality are the enemy of woman's freedom. They mire her in the animal, in the immanent, in the realm of being-acted-upon. They render her inessential to herself; her very being is defined by providing for the material needs of others, thus relegating her to work that cannot liberate:

> Her life is not directed toward ends: she is absorbed in producing or caring for things that are never more than means, such as food, clothing, and shelter. These things are inessential intermediaries between animal life and free existence. The sole value that appertains to the inessential means is utility; it is at the level of utility that the housekeeper lives, and she does not flatter herself that she is anything more than a person useful to her kindred.
>
> (1974, 672)

Woman qua woman belongs to the world of things, of repetitive, material needs. She exists to be used by the essential self, by that being which carries within itself its own value, its own worth. Her worth, by contrast, must necessarily refer to the other. She is valuable not in and of herself, but in relation to him, and particularly in relation to his material needs.

Including his sexual needs, which are constructed as primarily material. Her sexual subjectivity, then, is a contradiction in terms. Feminine sexuality is limited to being a passive object of man's sexual attention and agency, and precludes choice or decisions. To be a sex object is to participate in the inherent passivity of materiality, and is thus necessarily to be inferior to the transcendent, active, acting male.

It is important to remember at this point that Beauvoir's analysis explicitly recognizes the ambiguity of woman's situation. Woman does not easily or utterly take up this position of inessential other because she has within her the human desire to transcend. Moreover, relations between man and woman are complicated by the fact that in order to be object, woman must choose to do so, thus demonstrating an agency that is allegedly impossible.

> Man wants woman to be object, she *makes* herself object; at the very moment when she does that, she is exercising a free activity. Therein is her original treason; the most docile, the most passive, is still a conscious being; and sometimes the fact that in giving herself to him she looks at him and judges him is enough to make him feel duped; she is supposed to be only something offered, no more than prey. He also demands, however, that this "thing" give herself over to him of her own free will: in bed he asks her to feel pleasure; in the home she must sincerely recognize his superiority and his merits. She is, then, to feign independence at the moment of obedience, although at other moments she actively plays the comedy of being passive.
>
> (1974, 684; italics in the original)

So, for Beauvoir, the "thingness" of woman is uneasily, incompletely imposed. Yet it remains the attempt to render woman a "thing," a passive, flesh-bound, immanent creature, existing only as a means for others' ends, that is the crime of the patriarchal structure.

Catharine MacKinnon's use of objectification shares much with Beauvoir's analysis, although it remains even more relentlessly focused on sexual objectification as opposed to objectification in general. One of the first places in MacKinnon's work that mentions objectification is her discussion of female athletes (1987, 18). There, she distinguishes objectification from stereotypes, arguing that the phenomenon of objectification extends beyond merely incorrect ideas or images such that it actually creates reality and types of beings.

> What I'm suggesting is that the sexual, by which I mean the gender, objectification of women that has distinguished between women, on the one hand, and the successful athlete, on the other, has reached deeper than just mistaken ideas about what women can and cannot do, notions that can be thought out of existence by the insightful or the exceptionally ambitious. It is not only ideas in the head that have excluded us from resources and most everything else. It is also the social meaning of female identity that has restricted and contained us. If a woman is defined hierarchically so that the male idea of a woman defines womanhood, and if men have power, this idea becomes reality. It is therefore real. It is not just an illusion or a fantasy or a mistake. It becomes *embodied* because it is enforced.
>
> (1987, 119; italics in the original)

The contrast between the woman and the athlete—a contrast that, MacKinnon herself admits, was even sharper prior to Title IX legislation—indicates the degree to which the gender identity that is marked female is, in MacKinnon's view, necessarily characterized by the kind of passivity that objects have. Women qua women cannot *act*, and it is this lack of capacity, as opposed to muscular inferiority or some other kind of biological difference, that renders women athletes not real athletes. Or not real women—either way.

Also central to MacKinnon's theory is that such hierarchical definitions do not exist primarily as policy, or concepts, but find their most potent and meaningful expression in actual bodies. Objectification thus manifests itself as a constructive force—oppressive, to be sure, but not exactly repressive. Like Foucault, MacKinnon takes power to be a force by which subjects are not contained but rather produced. Objectification, in all its forms, succeeds in making women objects. To be a woman is to be thing-like.

As is well known, MacKinnon privileges pornography as a major way in which objectification is effected. When MacKinnon says that pornography objectifies women she means at least two things. First, she sees a clear connection between women-through-porn and inanimate objects:

> How sincere or cynical their [i.e., *Playboy* executives] rejection of rape is, I don't know. I do know that breaking a cup, accidentically or on purpose, is made less wrenching by the availability of glue and replacements and that the line between use and abuse of women, a line *Playboy* insists on to defend itself, does not exist in practice.
>
> (1987, 139)

Porn thus constructs women along the lines of things, material entities that are available, appropriately, for human use. Second—and this point is of course related to the first—women-through-porn are the target of a