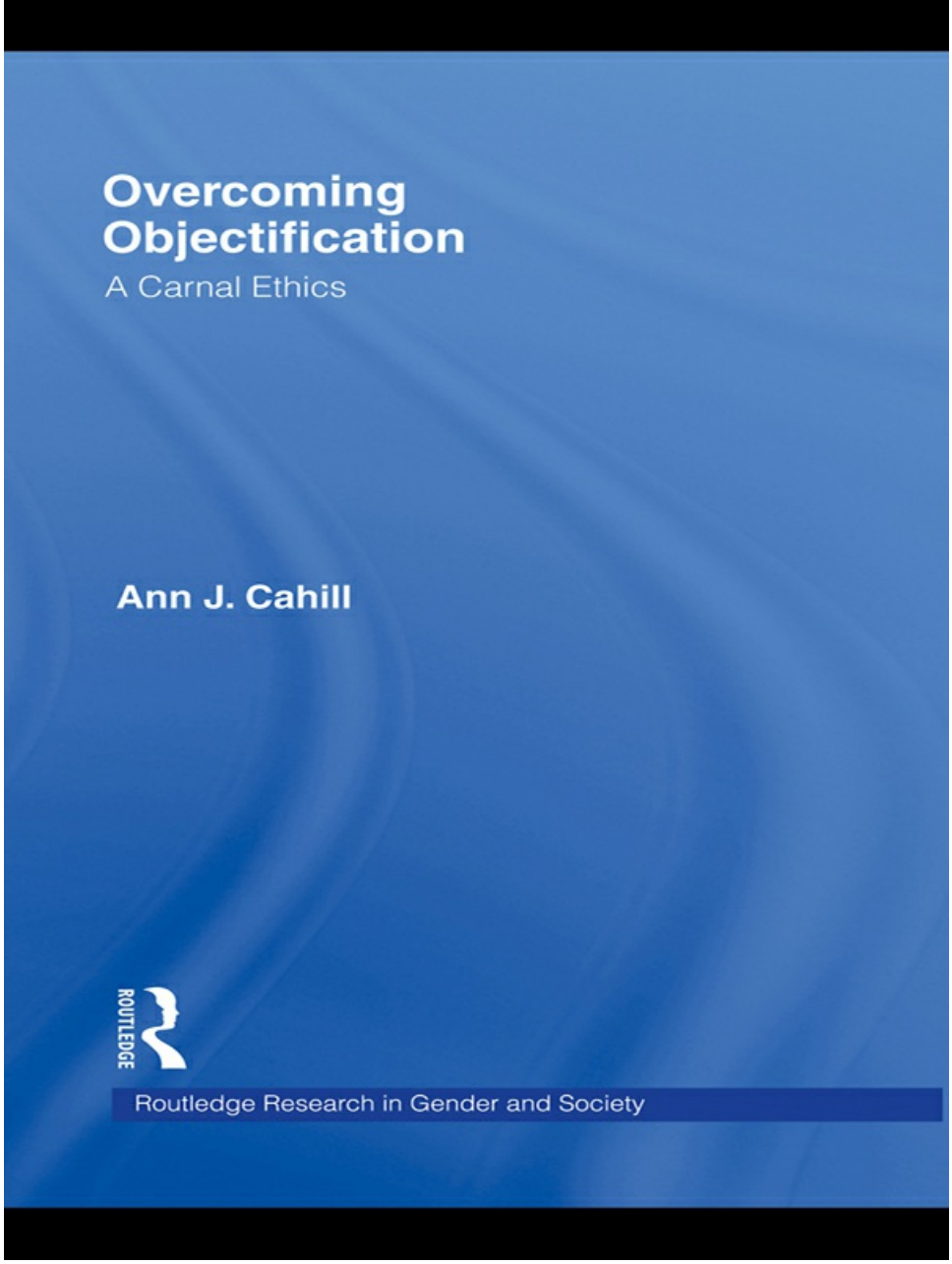
Overcoming
Objectification
A Carnal Ethics
Ann J. Cahill
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Overcoming Objectification

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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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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.

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 sexualizing and sexual gaze, existing to produce pleasure for the heterosexual male viewer.

> Women in pornography are bound, battered, tortured, humiliated, and killed. Or, to be fair to the soft core, merely taken and used. This is being done to real women now. It is being done for a reason: it gives sexual pleasure to its consumers and therefore profits to its providers.
>
> (1987, 199)

But MacKinnon's point is not only that pornography represents women as things, although that is certainly important. More crucial is that pornography is not mere representation, but the creation of sets of identities that place real women very much in the line of fire.

> Sex forced on real women so that it can be sold at a profit and forced on other real women; women's bodies trussed and maimed and raped and made into things to be hurt and obtained and accessed, and this presented as the nature of women in a way that is acted on and acted out, over and over; the coercion that is visible and the coercion that has become invisible—this and more bothers feminists about pornography. Obscenity as such probably does little harm. Pornography is integral to attitudes and behaviors of violence and discrimination that define the treatment and status of half the population.
>
> (1987, 175)

Pornography, then, serves to make sexuality in a certain mold, characterized by feminine passivity/inferiority and masculine activity/superiority. By defining women as objects, pornography renders their speech either irrelevant or unintelligible (MacKinnon 1987, 182). Women cannot undermine such dismissal by speaking more, because pornography (and other forms of sexual discrimination) has done its work: women must speak as women, but as women, their speech has no traction.

Here, an important difference between MacKinnon's take on objectification and Beauvoir's becomes clear. For Beauvoir, the identity of "woman" is not entirely subsumed by the patriarchal attempt to limit women to a life of immanence. Women still experience that tug of transcendence, that seemingly paradoxical urge to act, to be a subject; and so female subjectivity is not a contradiction in terms. For MacKinnon, the very category of female, and the sexuality that such a category can ever encompass, is necessarily marked by passivity and inferiority, and the only hope for equality lies in its dismantling.

Despite this difference, the theories of Beauvoir and MacKinnon can serve as useful foundational texts. They are excellent examples of how objectification has been deployed to illustrate the ways in which women have been rendered inferior and excluded from the realm of the fully human. As the term objectification continued to be used in feminist thinking and politics, it maintained many of the connotations found in Beauvoir and MacKinnon's texts. Most generally, objectification referred to social images or behavior that treat women as if they were things, that is, not full-fledged persons. As "sex objects," women are portrayed as devoid of recognizably complex personalities; moreover, they are often perceived as having little or no ethical worth. The objectification of women is a crucial element of patriarchy, insofar as it justifies various kinds of mistreatment of women: if women aren't really full persons, then to hurt or insult them is not ethically problematic. Women are objectified when their appearance is considered to be of utmost importance to their identity; when their appearance (particularly aspects of appearance that are especially socially loaded, such as weight) is constructed as open to public criticism and comment; indeed, whenever women's bodily existence takes precedence over their subjectivity. Some scholarship has even treated objectification as a quantifiable trait, such that certain images could be understood as having high or low levels of objectification (see Bogaert and Turkovich 1993).[2]

As I indicated earlier, the centrality of the concept of objectification to a variety of feminist concerns exists in striking contrast to the dearth of scholarly, philosophical treatments of it. Three exceptions to this rule are analyses developed by Linda LeMoncheck, Martha Nussbaum, and Rae Langton, analyses that will

serve to ground my understanding (and critique) of objectification. Although these arguments differ somewhat, all demonstrate the central difficulties that characterize feminist approaches to objectification. I will therefore conclude this chapter by arguing that objectification, as currently conceptualized, is overly burdened by philosophical legacies that do not and cannot serve feminist ends. If feminists want to criticize such social phenomena as pornography, sexualized images of women, and prostitution—and I agree that such criticisms are absolutely necessary—a new conceptual tool is needed.

LINDA LEMONCHECK: OBJECTIFICATION/ DEHUMANIZATION

Linda LeMoncheck's *Dehumanizing Woman: Treating Persons as Sex Objects* (1985) is virtually the only full-length philosophical work devoted solely to a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of objectification. As such, it is telling that LeMoncheck herself eventually distances her analysis from the term, opting for "dehumanization" as a more accurate description of the ways in which women are constructed, particularly through sexual innuendo, behavior, and images, as lesser human beings. For LeMoncheck, the moral wrong in objectification lies in its failure to treat women as moral equals; objectification, then, entails the expression (indeed, the incarnation) of the belief that women are inferior to men and that they therefore do not deserve equal treatment.

Of course, despite LeMoncheck's eventual adoption of the term "dehumanization," it is no accident that the failure to recognize women as moral equals essentially reduces them to non-subjects, that is, objects. Moral equality, for LeMoncheck, is one of the characteristics that distinguishes persons from other beings, and, importantly, from other bodies. "[I]t is only when women are regarded as inanimate objects, bodies, or animals, where their status as the moral equals of persons has been demeaned or degraded, that the expression 'sex objectification' is correctly used" (1985, 11). Note that non-human animals are categorized here as more similar to nonsentient entities than to human persons (a categorization that is also found, just as parenthetically, in MacKinnon and Nussbaum). The association of the feminine with the animal is a complex matter that has been explored in provocative detail by ecofeminist philosophers, particularly Carol Adams (1990) and Val Plumwood (1993). I will address that particular association, and its conceptual relationship to the idea of objectification, later. For the moment, though, let us stipulate that what holds this category together is the shared lack of personhood. Objectification, in one deft move, reduces women to things, and therefore non-persons, thereby robbing them of the respect that persons demand.

LeMoncheck's analysis obviously relies heavily on the distinction between persons and non-persons, a distinction that warrants a closer look. Following a fairly traditional, modern view of the person, LeMoncheck lists "distinctive human capacities" (1985, 16–17), including, among others, sentience, self-awareness, rationality, self-determination, and reflective thought. The distinctive capacities that mark persons make experiences such as self-respect and autonomy possible; they also, of course, allow for the possibility of the loss of both. Because inanimate objects and animals do not inherently (according to LeMoncheck) have the capacity for self-respect, it is impossible to humiliate them. Because they cannot reflect on their own lives, it is impossible to cause the distress of regret or the trauma of shame (1985, 18). These differences between persons and non-persons means that persons demand a different—and clearly more extensive—set of moral responsibilities.

For LeMoncheck, it is clear that the category of "person" is a moral category whose members share capacities that are for the most part intellectually and/or cognitively derived. These capacities produce the familiar rights of the autonomous being (freedom from injury, exploitation, and stereotypes; the freedoms of self-determination and privacy) that mark many traditional political philosophies, most notably those of Kant. When a person's rights go unrecognized, are trampled upon or hindered, the person is humiliated, harmed, and degraded—that is, wronged. This is precisely the dynamic of sexual objectification.

> What is necessary to identify an incident as sex objectification is that the sex object be treated as an object, body, or animal but not also as the moral equal of persons. She is treated as if she lacked one or more of the distinctive human capacities upon which her rights to a certain level of well-being and freedom are based … We shall call such degradation or subordination "dehumanization" to distinguish it from the simple "objectification" of the artist's model in our example. What this analysis suggests is that one can treat a woman as sexually attractive without treating her as a sex object, by treating her as a sexually attractive moral equal or person.
>
> (1985, 29)

In this turn of the argument, LeMoncheck more clearly presents her notion of personhood as an essentially additive characteristic, a building block placed atop the other traits that humans share with animals (as well as other objects). Among the many possibilities of human interaction include two situations: treating an other (or others) as bodies but not moral equals; or treating an other (or others) as bodies and as moral equals.

LeMoncheck's analysis lent a significant level of subtlety to the feminist understanding of objectification/dehumanization. Importantly, she emphasizes that it is not quite sufficient to describe the phenomenon as treating a woman as nothing more than a body. It is possible to objectify a person while retaining a recognition of that person's intellectual abilities, for example, or her capacity for mothering, or her familial relation to you—because one can still consider such a person less than a moral equal. In other words, the objectified woman is not in all ways similar to any other object, be it animate or inanimate. The act of objectification, while not causing all personal characteristics of the objectified person to recede into nothingness, renders the objectified person one who is (properly) subordinate to the objectifier, worthy of less respect and less regard.

Crucially, the fundamental distinction being made between persons and non-persons is not itself rooted in sexuality. As with many feminist philosophers concerned with the problem of objectification, LeMoncheck insists on distinguishing between sexual objectification and sexuality itself. To be sexualized is not necessarily to be objectified; otherwise, sexuality itself becomes morally problematic, and LeMoncheck strenuously denies that this is the case. Only when sexuality takes places in the context of degrading one or more of the persons involved to less than a person does it become unethical. Likewise, LeMoncheck claims that objectification per se is not, in all cases, objectionable (1985, 12–13). There are times and situations when treating one's body, or the body of another, as a thing is not only acceptable, but desirable. The example of surgery illustrates this point: at the moment when the surgeon is delicately removing an unwanted item from my innards, I am quite happy for her to be approaching me largely as a material entity. Although the care with which the operating room is set up and run indicates the value of my being and health, I do not want the surgeon's attention to be focused on those aspects of me that render me a person (my values, my family status, my perceptions, my preferences, etc.): I'd prefer her attention to be absorbed by my material and bodily particularities (where the unwanted item is located, how to separate it from the other bodily elements that surround it, etc.). Somewhat paradoxically, the surgeon's ability to depersonalize me may be crucial to my well-being, rather than an affront to it.

LeMoncheck terms such treatment as "causal objectification," where the objectification serves the larger purpose of enhancing a person's subjectivity or health. "The point is that such causal objectification becomes causal dehumanization when the person qua object is unjustifiably treated as deserving less of the kind of well-being and freedom that other persons enjoy" (1985, 33). The purpose of the surgery described earlier is to increase my well-being, and objectification to that end is quite acceptable. However, a medical or surgical procedure done for purposes other than the patient's well-being (for example, the Tuskegee experiments, or those conducted in Nazi concentration camps) could very well constitute, in LeMoncheck's terms, causal dehumanization.

LeMoncheck's analysis attempts to distinguish between objectification/ dehumanization and morally acceptable sexual attraction and interaction. Yet, she also addresses the complex ways in which objectification affects the structure of (hetero)eroticism itself, both in men and women. The roles of sexuality and degradation do not remain distinct in the dynamic of sexual objectification; instead, they blur in at least two ways. First— and here LeMoncheck's analysis resonates with that of MacKinnon—the degradation itself becomes erotic (almost certainly for the objectifier, and sometimes for the objectified). The objectified woman becomes sexy by becoming less-than-man, and vice versa. The erotic nature of the encounter, its very sexiness, is grounded in and predicated upon the woman's lack of equal worth.

Second, the objectifier's sexuality itself becomes "a kind of focus for her humiliation, embarrassment, and domination" (1985, 35). In this move, the woman's sexuality is used as a weapon against her personhood. References to and images of it become framed as essentially shameful. Thus persistent sexual objectification/dehumanization limits women's ability to express freely their sexual desires, experiences, and delights. All feminine sexuality becomes pornography,

and the feminine body itself comes to stand for that which is dirty and reprehensible about sex.

> My suggestion is that sex objectification would not be as objectionable for women if there were not two traditional assumptions made about sex generally: (1) that (at least some) sex is dirty, sinful, or evil; and (2) that, because of the distinction made in (1), women fall into two classes, good and bad, virgin and whore, women on pedestals and women in gutters. Moreover, according to one extreme of this tradition, only "bad" women seek, desire, or enjoy sex, while "good" women merely "tolerate" the sexual advances of their husbands and shun completely such advances by those with whom they are on less socially intimate terms.
>
> (LeMoncheck 1985, 48)

The strategic use of feminine sexuality in the process of objectification/ dehumanization explains a crucial confusion that has plagued both feminists and non-feminists alike: namely, that criticizing many examples of objectification seems tantamount to vilifying sexuality itself. Many so-called anti-feminist feminists have charged feminism with an overly puritanical, Victorian perspective on sexuality that renders sexuality inherently degrading and fails to recognize anything but the narrowest scope of sexual behaviors and attitudes as appropriate (see for example Roiphe 1994 and Paglia 1992). Such critiques are clearly misguided, and mistake the messenger for the message. Feminist analyses point out the ways in which sexist social structures have hijacked (particularly female) sexuality as part of a larger project of degrading women. To analyze the ways in which women's sexualities are used to construct them as inferior beings—as moral inequals, LeMoncheck would say—is not to problematize sexuality in all of its potential forms, but to recognize that feminine sexuality has been shaped and described in particular ways, few of which have at their core an inherent respect for women themselves. The lesson is not to view any and all sexual expressions as degrading, but rather to question why there are so few that aren't, and to try to create the possibilities for sexuality without shame, desire without degradation.

LeMoncheck's analysis helps us to see that for (heterosexual) men, sexuality and moral equality are not at odds. One's status as a male person is only enhanced by the degree to which one participates in and enjoys (heterosexual) sex, because that sex is conceptually undergirded by an assumption of male superiority. For the most part, the same does not hold for women, for whom (heterosexual) sex entails the necessary taking up of a position of inferiority. For men, to be sexually objectified does not carry with it the threat of degradation or lessening of moral worth (or, perhaps most importantly, the threat of violence); and so imagining themselves as the recipients of the kind of treatment women regularly receive does not always or often inspire empathy for women's plight, but can instead result in a belief that women are overly sensitive or paranoid. Clearly, the prospect of objectifying men is a distinctly different issue, in the current political and social climate, than that of objectifying women, as I will discuss in greater length in Chapter 3.

All in all, LeMoncheck's analysis endows the feminist analysis of objectification with greater depth and clarity than it had previously enjoyed. She argues that to be the object of the sexually objectifying gaze is to be rendered and recognized as a non-person, lacking in one or more of the capacities that are the traits of persons—and it is precisely this dehumanizing effect that constitutes its moral wrong. The sexually objectified person is limited to an object with the "ability to sexually, attract, stimulate, or satisfy" (1985, 35) the objectifier, and any behavior which contradicts that definition is met with at least disapproval, in some cases anger, and in extreme cases violence. Within the context of a sexual encounter, the sexual objectifier enjoys a greater degree of power in terms of constructing the parameters and quality of the sexual interaction, and uses that power to frame the interaction in such a way to disallow the full moral equality of the objectified.

> Notice that it is not simply that A finds B sexy and also treats B as less than a moral equal … The dehumanization of the sex object is an integral feature of the sexual relations between A and B, not something conjoined to those relations, logically independent of them.
>
> (1985, 36)

Thus, within the context of sexual objectification, women are presented at best with two choices: either be sexual, and therefore be degraded and considered a moral inequal, or refuse sexuality, thus limiting their scope of personal expression considerably. The option that is not offered within this context is one of moral equality with men: the status of the fully human.

MARTHA NUSSBAUM: INSTRUMENTALITY AND AUTONOMY

Martha Nussbaum's analysis of objectification shares with Linda LeMoncheck's a concern with sexuality. More specifically, her "Objectification" (1995) takes up the problem of examples of objectification that would at least appear to be not only morally acceptable but positive—for example, affirming and delightful experiences of being viewed as sexually attractive. She claims that our inability to distinguish between these positive experiences and the negative experiences of being objectified is related to our lack of philosophical clarity concerning the phenomenon of objectification itself. Moreover, like LeMoncheck, she argues that objectification is not always morally problematic, and that in order to be able to discern between objectionable and nonobjectionable instances, we need to explore the term more closely and pay sufficient attention to the context within which any particular instance takes place.

For Nussbaum, objectification of a person takes the form of a fundamental error; it "is a question of treating one thing as another: One is treating *as an object* what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being" (1995, 256–57; italics in the original). Like LeMoncheck, Nussbaum's analysis rests upon a strong distinction between persons and things, a distinction that she names as distinctly Kantian. Such a distinction, she argues, undergirds virtually all analyses of objectification (1995, 257).

To say that objectification is a matter of treating a non-object as if it were an object raises a question that LeMoncheck's analysis didn't address, namely: how exactly do human being treat objects? Or, even more precisely, which of the different ways in which human beings treat objects become problematic when transferred to our treatment of non-objects, that is, persons?

Setting aside obvious similarities between treatment of objects and that of persons that do not seem morally problematic (for example, the fact that humans see and touch both), Nussbaum delineates seven potentially problematic traits associated with objects: instrumentality, lack of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and lack of subjectivity (1995, 257). As human beings interact with objects, we often and quite appropriately consider them as exchangeable with other objects, or as reducible in value to our use of them, or as appropriately destroyed should we deem such destruction necessary or desired.[3] Objects can be owned, and are as a matter of course considered to be devoid of self-direction or inherent, self-contained value. Not every object holds every characteristic (there are, for example, irreplaceable objects, as well as objects not subject to ownership), but every interaction with an object presumes and is predicated upon at least one of these traits.

Although the distinctions among the different factors are significant, Nussbaum ultimately concludes that among them, two are of particular importance. The first is autonomy:

> [A]utonomy is in a certain sense the most exigent of the notions on our list. It seems difficult if not impossible to imagine a case in which an inanimate object is treated as autonomous, though we can certainly imagine exceptions to all the others.
>
> (1995, 260)

Denial of autonomy, then, emerges as a privileged factor in the treatment of objects. Even when we treat a given object as irreplaceable (say, the Hope diamond) or not properly capable of ownership (natural resources, perhaps), we do not consider that object as functioning as an autonomous subject, with its own unique perspective, set of goals, or capacity for decision-making. No matter how we are interacting with an object, or what object we are interacting with, it seems directly contradictory to inquire as to that object's interests in that interaction.

Given that the lack of autonomy is the most consistent commonality among human beings' treatment of objects, then to treat a person *like* an object is most likely to deny that person's autonomy. Treating persons like an object may also entail treating that person as violable, or fungible, or any other of the traits listed, but virtually all of these interactions would be accompanied by a denial of autonomy. Moreover, for Nussbaum, autonomy functions as perhaps the most defining element of moral equality among persons; and so objectifying a person involves denying their autonomy, and therefore denying their personhood. Once the objectified person has been robbed of their autonomy, other harms become easier to impose. The objectified person becomes more and more like a thing, an appropriate target for humiliation, violation, and disposability.

The second characteristic of particular importance to Nussbaum is instrumentality. In fact, instrumentality and the denial of autonomy seem to go hand in hand. Comparing the dynamic to that of slavery, and referring to MacKinnon's claim that "sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism," (1995, 263; original quotation in MacKinnon 1987, 48), Nussbaum's analysis of objectification becomes ever more Kantian:

> This example [of slavery] prepares us for the MacKinnon/Dworkin analysis of sexuality, since it shows us how a certain sort of instrumental use of persons, negating the autonomy that is proper to them as persons, also leaves the human being so denuded of humanity, in the eyes of the objectifier, that he or she seems ripe for other abuses as well—for the refusal of imagination involved in the denial of subjectivity, for the denial of individuality involved in fungibility, and even for bodily and spiritual violation and abuse, if that should appear to be what best suits the will and purposes of the objectifier. The lesson seems to be that there is something especially problematic about instrumentalizing human beings, something that involves denying what is fundamental to them as human beings, namely, the status of being ends in themselves. From this one denial, other forms of objectification that are not logically entailed by the first seem to follow.
>
> (1995, 265)

Having established the importance of the role of instrumentality, Nussbaum is immediately faced with the problem of examples of instrumentality that do not seem ethically troublesome. Persons interact with the bodies of other persons in order to gain comfort, or sexual pleasure, or the easing of pain, and at least some of these interactions are morally acceptable. To deny this claim is to risk defining any and all bodily interactions as inherently morally suspect, a risk Nussbaum clearly wants to avoid.

Nussbaum therefore qualifies her analysis by emphasizing that the general context of any given relationship must be taken into account before judging whether, for example, using a lover's stomach as a pillow (her example, 1995, 265) constitutes a denial of that person's autonomy. If such instrumentality takes place within a context that honors and supports each person's autonomy, then such "use" of the person's body may well be acceptable (it is assumed, of course, that the person so "used" has the freedom to deny such access to her/his body at any given point). Instrumentality can lead to the denial of autonomy, and when it does so, it becomes morally problematic; and indeed, given the close conceptual relationship between instrumentality and lack of autonomy, the former almost always entails the latter. Thus, Nussbaum concludes, treating a person as an instrument is "always morally problematic; if it does not take place in a larger context of regard for humanity, it is a central form of the morally objectionable" (1995, 289).

Nussbaum's continued emphasis on instrumentality, even so qualified, clearly demonstrates her Kantian debt. Such an emphasis, although, persistently problematizes sexuality, and as Nussbaum points out, Kant is hardly helpful on this point: he "seems to think that in a typical sex act both parties eagerly desire both to be objectifiers and to be objects" (1995, 267). The problem here is that sexuality itself seems to be necessary marked by instrumentality and lack of autonomy, which places it in direct opposition to this model of personhood. To be sexual, apparently, is not only to be an object, but in some way to desire objectification: something no self-respecting person should want to do. Kant solved the problem by vilifying sexuality and considering it a breakdown of subjectivity; MacKinnon and Dworkin (Nussbaum says) solve it by theoretically allowing for a mutual and symmetrical loss of autonomy, the symmetry being the distinguishing mark

between acceptable and non-acceptable examples of objectification. Nussbaum finds both solutions untenable. Kant's demonization of sexuality contradicts the phenomenological experience of sexual encounters, which at least have the possibility for enhancing a person's well-being and sense of self. On the other hand, MacKinnon and Dworkin's analysis renders the scope of acceptable sexual encounters overly narrow, and seems to encourage an excessively individualized, case-by-case ethical evaluation of sexual interactions.

In considering this problem, Nussbaum is particularly interested in exploring an apparent contradiction between sexuality and autonomy. Invoking scenes from the novels of D. H. Lawrence, she notices that positive sexual encounters—those that serve to enhance each participant's being and sense of personhood—often entail a loss of autonomy. Nussbaum is careful not to portray such encounters as universal or universally experienced; instead, she takes them as a set of possibilities, one model of positive sexual interactions that demands explanation. On this point, it seems to me that Nussbaum's intuition is correct: mutually enjoyable sexual encounters tend to (or, at the very least, can) involve a certain loss of autonomy, by which each person's experience is so deeply affected and shaped by the other's behavior that the individuals involved no longer experience themselves as self-contained, self-moving persons. Moreover, some aspects of such positive encounters seem precisely to take the form of objectification, insofar as lovers delight precisely in each other's materiality.

To explore this insight, and continuing her search for the defining line between objectionable objectification and nonobjectionable objectification, Nussbaum turns to analyzing several different literary and visual texts, including a D. H. Lawrence passage, an image from *Playboy*, an excerpt from relatively hard-core pornography, and a description of gay men in a bathhouse. Each text includes explicit descriptions of body parts, and as such, appears to qualify as an example of objectification. Yet in Nussbaum's analysis, some are not degrading at all, whereas others are deeply degrading and morally unacceptable. Nussbaum concludes that merely referring to or representing body parts—even at great length or in graphic detail—is not inherently degrading or objectionable. Other factors must be at work here.

In analyzing the different examples, Nussbaum notes that eroticism and sexual satisfaction often involve the blurring of that which distinguishes one person from the other. In positively describing the Lawrence passage, she notes that "the surrender of autonomy and even of agency and subjectivity are joyous, a kind of victorious achievement in the prison-house of English respectability" (1995, 275). Although Nussbaum is careful not to characterize sexuality in any kind of universal terms, it would appear that positive sexual encounters—the kind that are not morally objectionable, that provide delight and pleasure for all involved—may precisely depend on this blurring between persons. Indeed, Nussbaum seems (albeit implicitly) to be struggling with the insight that to a certain extent, Kant had it right: sexuality and autonomy seem to be somewhat contradictory. If autonomy is somehow central to personhood, and to moral agency, and if sexual encounters necessarily involve the loss of autonomy, wouldn't sexual encounters then manifest themselves as morally unacceptable?

Nussbaum solves these difficulties (although she doesn't articulate them as explicitly as I have here) again by highlighting the context within which the sexual encounter takes place, noting that even the loss of one's own subjectivity does not necessitate the objectification of the other:

> [W]here there is a loss in subjectivity in the moment of lovemaking, this can be and frequently is accompanied by an intense concern for the subjectivity of the partner at other moments, since the lover is intensely focused on the moods and wishes of that one person, whose states mean so much for his or own.
>
> (1995, 276)

In other words, even as one's own subjectivity may be blurred, the treatment of the other is enhanced. One may "lose oneself" in sex without losing sight of the other as an equal, valuable person.

This persistent attention to the individuality of the person with whom one is sexually interacting can also render attention to individual body parts morally acceptable (1995, 276). In other words, Nussbaum argues, one can delight in the body parts of one's sexual partner—even to the extent of "identifying persons with parts of their bodies" (1995, 276)— without necessarily dehumanizing that individual, as long as such an action is accompanied "with an intense regard for the person's individuality, which can even be expressed in a personalizing and individualizing of the bodily organs themselves" (1995, 276). Treating one's sexual partner as a bodily, material entity is not contradictory to treating them as an individual, autonomous person.

Morally problematic examples of objectification, in contrast, preclude the possibility of the autonomy and subjectivity of the objectified person. Here, the objectified person is treated as a body without the accompanying characteristics of personhood—without the assumption, that is, of individual worth, or the capacity for self-definition, or the freedom to have and express individual preferences. In objectifying a person, the objectifier refuses to recognize that person's subjective particularity: and so the objectified person is degraded.

Moreover, like LeMoncheck, Nussbaum emphasizes that this objectification also becomes part and parcel of the eroticism of the moment:

> What is made sexy here [in the example of hard-core pornography] is precisely the act of turning a creature whom in one dim corner of one's mind one knows to be human into a thing, or something rather than someone. And to be able to do that to a fellow human being is sexy because it is a dizzying experience of power.
>
> (1995, 281)

Analyzing an example from *Playboy*, Nussbaum notes that

> the male reader is told, in effect, that he is the one with subjectivity and autonomy, and on the other side are things that look very sexy and are displayed out there for his consumption, like delicious pieces of fruit, existing only or primarily to satisfy his desire.
>
> (1995, 283)

Objectification allows for any given sexual interaction (including interactions between persons and texts) to be centered on only one person, one locus of subjectivity, while the other person (whether represented or actually present) is drained of personhood.

Yet, as Nussbaum has already noted, positive sexual encounters may at once maintain a recognition of the subjectivity of the persons involved while also eroding their autonomy (an erosion that is experienced as both pleasurable and self-affirming). How are we to account for such a loss? To solve this conundrum, Nussbaum ultimately turns to the necessity of a recognition of context. She argues that of all the ways in which one can treat a person as an object, the most clearly and consistently objectionable is instrumentalization, which is only morally acceptable if it takes place "in a larger context of regard for humanity" (1995, 289). The denial of autonomy is treated similarly: it is morally unacceptable unless the larger context of the relationship sufficiently recognizes the autonomy of the beings involved. The other aspects of objectification—treating a person, or a person's body parts, as fungible or even violable—may be, in different contexts, morally objectionable, but in other contexts may be morally acceptable.

Essentially, then, Nussbaum commits to the Kantian parameters of the problem as outlined by MacKinnon and Dworkin, but adds to their analysis an important recognition of the relevance of specific contexts and situations. This recognition goes some way—perhaps even further than LeMoncheck's—in articulating a sexual ethics that does not attempt to transcend or implicitly vilify the body. It leaves sexual persons the moral space within which to experience bodily pleasures without necessarily treating each other as only things. However, as I argue later in this chapter, the Kantian legacy remains intact, and ultimately undermines Nussbaum's attempt to account for a positive, embodied, and ethically acceptable sexuality.

RAE LANGTON'S SEXUAL SOLIPSISM

The most recent feminist philosophical account of objectification emanates from Rae Langton (2009), whose approach to objectification has explicit connections to the work of MacKinnon and Nussbaum. Like MacKinnon, she is concerned with the ways in which pornography perpetuates and enacts sexual inequality; indeed, she defends MacKinnon's analysis regarding pornography against critics such as Judith Butler. Her philosophical affiliation with Nussbaum is similarly clear, and because so much of her analysis shares Nussbaum's conclusions, my discussion of her will be somewhat briefer then the previous two sections.

When Langton addresses Nussbaum's analysis, she is mostly concerned with extending, rather than critiquing, it. I will focus here on two responses she has to Nussbaum's theory: 1) her suggestion that Nussbaum's list of ways in which persons can be objectified, although insightful and useful, is incomplete; and 2) her claim that Nussbaum's approach to autonomy is somewhat lacking.

Although the first response receives relatively little attention in Langton's text, it indicates an important way in which her work does, in fact, differ from Nussbaum's. Having explored Nussbaum's list, Langton mentions rather parenthetically: "One absence from Nussbaum's list, notwithstanding its prominence in her illustrative examples, is the idea of reducing someone to their body. So let us put this down this [sic] as an eighth feature" (2009, 228). Here Langton is articulating a rather common sense notion of objectification, namely, that it constitutes being treated*only* as a body, *merely* as flesh. Objectification shows up here as a degrading reduction, treating a person (who is body-plus-something else) not only as reduced, but as reduced to the least important part of that equation.

The parenthetical quality of Langton's addition to Nussbaum's list implies that this was a mere oversight on Nussbaum's part, and that Nussbaum would consider such an addition little more than a friendly amendment. Such an implication, however, is deeply misguided, and demonstrates a misunderstanding of a central motivation of Nussbaum's text. Even more acutely than LeMoncheck's analysis, Nussbaum's seeks to make sense out of experiences of purported objectification that may not be ethically problematic. She explicitly recognizes that there are situations wherein being treated as a body can be ethically neutral or even ethically desirable, and in doing so rejects an easy anti-materialism that renders bodily interactions ethically questionable almost by definition. Langton's analysis, by contrast, ignores the possibility of such situations, and seems to assume that being treated as a body is virtually always problematic. Hence her willingness to add to Nussbaum's list a factor which Nussbaum herself would almost certainly reject.

This difference aside, Langton generally accepts Nussbaum's approach, and only argues that a greater degree of nuance is necessary when considering the role that the denial of autonomy plays in objectification. Whereas Nussbaum utilizes a general reference to "autonomy-denial," Langton notices that there is an important distinction between the failure to attribute the capacity for autonomy and the act of violating autonomy:

> I take it that non-attribution is primarily a matter of attitude, whereas autonomy-violation is something more—a more active doing, perhaps one that prevents someone from doing what they choose. The distinction between non-attribution and violation is somewhat obscured by allowing "autonomy-denial" to label both.
>
> (2009, 233)

This distinction is particularly relevant in cases that Langton terms "sadistic rape," where the rapist specifically seeks to overcome the victim's autonomy. In this case, the objectification takes the form of actively, cruelly, and explicitly overcoming the autonomous will of the victim.

> In this sort of case, it's not that he doesn't *listen* to her saying "no"— he*wants* her to say "no". Here there is violation of a woman's autonomy committed by someone who affirms her autonomy, attributes to her a capacity for choice, and desires precisely to overcome that choice, make her do what she chooses not to do.
>
> (2009, 234; italics in the original)

Moreover, Langton questions Nussbaum's rather rosy portrayal of a kind of "self-surrender" (2009, 235). Where Nussbaum explains how this blurring of subjective boundaries can be a positive sexual experience, Langton notes that the sadist may desire (even if he does not force) that the sexual partner voluntarily cede their own autonomy, and that this paradoxical ceding represents yet another way (neither non-attribution of autonomy nor autonomy-denial) in which autonomy can be absent from sexual interactions, and problematically so.

In making these and other distinctions, Langton seeks to point out that the denial or violation of autonomy is more complex than Nussbaum recognized, and that the phenomenon of objectification often involves or even requires the affirmation of autonomy (an affirmation that does not mitigate its ethical wrongness). In addition, Langton notes that these kinds of distinctions demonstrate that Nussbaum's close association of autonomy-denial with instrumentality is flawed; instrumentality maps more cleanly onto autonomy-violation than non-attribution of autonomy, but even in the latter case, there are gaps (2009, 235).

Langton's work on objectification is not, however, limited to an evaluation of Nussbaum's theory. She also considers objectification from a perspective that hews closely to MacKinnon's, whereby she claims that objectification not only presents women in a certain (oppressive) way, but also works to create an oppressive reality. She articulates a vicious epistemological circle: "men objectify women if they view and treat them as objects of male sexual desire; they desire them to be submissive, and force them to submit; they believe that women are in fact submissive; and they believe that they are submissive by nature" (2009, 284). In other words, objectification brings about a world not only where women are treated as objects, but where women must show up as objects.

Such persistent objectification results in a situation of sexual solipsism, whereby any sexual interaction is centered on only one full, real person. The other party involved is a mere sex object:

> Women are treated as things, when they are treated as sex objects. What this amounts to is a matter of debate, but let us say provisionally that in sexual contexts, women are treated as things to the extent that women are treated as merely bodies, as merely sensory appearances, as not free, as items that can be possessed, as items whose value is merely instrumental.
>
> (2009, 316)

As with Nussbaum, Langton explicitly adopts a Kantian framework with regard to objectification, and although she recognizes some challenges that framework presents, she generally concedes its central commitments—including, as I will argue now, an ethically suspicious attitude toward the body.

FEMINIST MODELS OF OBJECTIFICATION: A CRITIQUE

My critique of contemporary feminist analyses of objectification is largely grounded in a theory of embodied intersubjectivity, that is, a theoretical approach that positions both the body and other subjects as central to the being of the human subject. I have explored the notion of embodied intersubjectivity in detail elsewhere (Cahill 2001), and therefore will only present a relatively brief exploration of it here.

The work of thinkers such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994b), Rosi Braidotti (1994), and Iris Marion Young (2005) emphasized the need for feminist philosophy to resist the definition of the self as primarily disembodied. To do so, these thinkers noted, was not only to exclude from philosophical consideration a wide and diverse set of experiences that are central to human existence; it is also to participate in a metaphysics that has traditionally excluded women from full personhood. And indeed this parallel is no accident. Women's inferiority has been largely (if not exclusively) articulated on the basis of both their particularly bodily characteristics but, even more profoundly, on the basis of their allegedly more intense affiliation with all things bodily. This affiliation, in a context of a mind/body hierarchy, relegated them to subhuman status. While some thinkers (such as, say, Mary Wollstonecraft [1792] 1983) describe the possibility of sexual liberation in terms of freeing women from this affiliation (both conceptually and, as much as is possible, literally), many contemporary feminist theorists of the body went in the opposite direction, sensing that a model of the embodied self could not only ground a broader critique of patriarchy, but could also create new possibilities for subjects of philosophical inquiry.

Importantly for the purposes of this discussion, this philosophical move to reclaim the embodied quality of subjectivity echoes central themes in ecofeminism, especially the analysis offered by Val Plumwood (1993). As I mentioned earlier, the inclusion of animals in the category of things that marks the work of LeMoncheck, Nussbaum, and MacKinnon is striking. How can sentient beings be lumped in with non-sentient entities, such that both constitute "objects" as opposed to "subjects"? Such groupings only make sense in the context of a Western metaphysics that places the natural and the bodily in opposition to the human—a metaphysics that, not coincidentally, associates the feminine with the former rather than the latter.

> The view that the connection of women with nature should simply be set aside as a relic of the past assumes that the task for both women and men is now that of becoming simply, unproblematically and fully *human*. But this takes as unproblematic what is not unproblematic, the concept of the human itself, which has in turn been constructed in the framework of exclusion, denial and denigration of the feminine sphere, the natural sphere and the sphere associated with subsistence. The question of what is human is itself now problematised, and one of the areas in which it is most problematic is in the relation of humans to nature, especially to the non-human world.
>
> (Plumwood 1993, 22; italics in the original)

Plumwood's critique of Western dualism importantly highlights how femininity/nature/bodies/things have been defined by their lack of what their supposedly superior partners have (reason/activity/soul/intellect), definitions that have then served to justify various kinds of ill-treatment. Even more significantly, however, Plumwood demonstrates that the hyperseparation between the human and the natural that Western metaphysics demands has been 1) necessarily accompanied by the devaluing of the realm of nature (that is, it is not enough for Western metaphysics that the human and nature be radically different; the former must also be superior to the latter) and 2) conceptually fundamental to the construction of the independent, autonomous, rational ideal of the self. Of course, this conceptual relationship renders the independent, autonomous, rational self paradoxically dependent upon that which is rejected—a dependence must be assiduously disavowed.

For Plumwood, then, the feminist critique of objectification cannot stop with moving "woman" from the "nature" category to the "human" category. Rather, it must question the ideological framework that allows association with the natural and bodily to function as a means of degradation. The realm of the natural and the bodily must no longer be constructed as, in Plumwood's term, "non-agentic, as passive, non-creative and inert, with action being imposed from without by an external force" (1993, 110), but instead must be reclaimed as central to (although, as Plumwood is careful to note, not wholly identical with) human existence.

To claim that the human subject is necessarily embodied is to reject a metaphysics that consistently privileges the non-material over the material, the universal over the particular, the eternal over the temporal. It is to recognize that all human experiences are situated by flesh, and that the desire to deny, marginalize, or dismiss that fact has been a crucial element in many systems of inequality. It is also to recognize that the ways in which materiality has been constructed—as passive, inert, waiting for the animating force of a soul or mind to give it shape and meaning—is itself problematic. Judith Butler (1993) argued that the very construction of matter as unconstructed, its masquerading as the natural, the given, was a paradox foundational to Western thought. More recently, Karen Barad (2006) has argued for the active role that matter plays in discursive practices, so as to further challenge the supposedly infinite malleability of materiality. To put it bluntly, matter *matters*—it does not lie in wait for some relevance or action to be imposed upon it, but participates actively in the shaping of the world and existence. To understand subjectivity as necessarily embodied is to notice that agency does not arise despite the body, and does not consist in overcoming the body, but rather is constituted by the body and bodily experiences.

Closely related to the re-imaging of the self as embodied was a reorientation of the self with regard to the other. For embodied subjects (unlike the independent being defined by the capacity for reason, exemplified perhaps most evocatively by the solitary Descartes) always bear the marks of interactions with other bodies. Human bodies cannot come into existence without being cared for by other bodies; human language cannot develop without interaction; bodily comportment and gestures, without which human subjects cannot act, are absorbed from exchanges of all sorts. And so the embodied subject is more properly termed an "intersubject," a term that, while not constructing persons as wholly determined by their environs or other persons, nevertheless notes that personhood and subjectivity cannot arise except within the context of relations. Or, to put it in Merleau-Pontian terms, as Gail Weiss does, it is to approach embodiment as intercorporeality:

> To describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies. Acknowledging and addressing the multiple corporeal exchanges that continually take place in our everyday lives, demands a corresponding recognition of the ongoing construction and reconstruction of our bodies and body images. These processes of construction and reconstruction in turn alter the very nature of these intercorporeal exchanges, and, in so doing, offer the possibility of expanding our social, political, and ethical horizons.
>
> (1999, 5–6)

In focusing on the ways in which embodied subjects shape, affect, and mark each other, this model of embodied intersubjectivity denies the strict distinctions between mind and body, self and other. It also demonstrates that absolute autonomy is not only a fantasy, but a nightmare; to be a person is to be-with others, and to strive for as much independence from other beings as possible is itself to embark upon a process of dehumanization. As Sara Ahmed (2000) has argued, even those figures who are the most politically and conceptually marginalized—the strangers who are marked by their failure to belong, and who are so often considered a threat to the established order—are part and parcel of the construction of those identities that are recognized as belonging. The other, as it turns out, is never far away.

This, then, is the model of embodied intersubjectivity: an approach to the human subject that considers both the flesh and the other to be central to agency and

any other crucial aspect of human existence. It is a model, as I will now argue, that is diametrically opposed to the feminist analyses of objectification explored earlier in this chapter.

Evangelia Papadaki (2007) has noted that both MacKinnon's and Nussbaum's theory of objectification are distinctly Kantian. It turns out that that diagnosis applies to LeMoncheck and Langton as well. All of these analyses involve, whether directly or indirectly, a model of personhood one that is deeply intertwined with autonomy and equality. This model constructs the person as primarily intellectual, equal to others by virtue of the capacity for rationality and the person's proper status as ends rather than means. These theories claim autonomy as a hallmark of the person, and objectification as a means of limiting or encroaching upon a person's autonomy.

As Nussbaum and, to a lesser extent, Langton recognize to rely on Kant when dealing with matters of sexual ethics is a shaky proposition. Kant's conclusions regarding the ethics of sexual interactions—namely, that they can only be ethical within the marital relationship—seem rather obviously contrary to feminist commitments. Yet given the number of relatively recent feminist philosophical texts seeking to validate a Kantian approach (Badhwar 2007; Brake 2005; Denis 2007; Herman 1993; Papadaki 2010), it would appear that there is a sense that when it comes to sexual ethics, feminism may not be able to do without, say, the means/ends distinction, or other such philosophical tools. In this section, I will argue that, in fact, there is much more to lose than there is to gain by adopting a Kantian approach to sexual ethics.

It is striking that, unlike Kant (and, for the matter, Langton), both LeMoncheck and Nussbaum are concerned with maintaining the possibility of a healthy, vibrant, passionate eroticism. Yet their theories are not capable of accounting fully for such a possibility, precisely because the relation of the self to the body remains problematic. At best, their theories imply that personhood is a trait that is added to embodiment; a person has a body, but is not a person by virtue of that body, and the particularity of that body need not (indeed, one should assume, does not) affect that individual's status as a person. The dignity that is the ethical right of a person is grounded in distinctly non-bodily characteristics (as long as the capacities for rationality, emotions, autonomy, etc. are assumed to be essentially non-bodily, as Kant certainly does).

The first difficulty with these approaches, then, is their reliance on a distinctly disembodied model of the subject. Such models, as I indicated earlier, are problematic, particularly from a feminist perspective. Not only do they tend to deny the relevance and particularity of women's experiences, but they also remain committed to parallel, hierarchized dichotomies (mind/body, self/other, subject/object, etc.) that are philosophically dubious. Insofar as feminist analyses of objectification remain committed to such models of the person, then, they will remain hampered by an understanding of personhood and subjectivity that does not sufficiently recognize the relevance of the body and materiality in general with regard to subjectivity.

Marginalizing the body from the self leads feminist critiques of objectification to an almost necessary suspicion of things bodily. Yet to be treated as a thing, a body, is not inherently degrading because we are, in fact, bodily things; it is only within the context of a theory of personhood that vilifies the material that such treatment becomes degrading. Gail Weiss makes a similar point in the context of a critique of Iris Marion Young and Sandra Lee Bartky who, Weiss argues, sometimes commit too quickly, albeit implicitly, to a mind/body hierarchy:

> Bartky, like Young, condemns in particular, societal attempts to "reduce" women to their bodies, that is, to regard them as no more than bodies. It is important to examine more closely, however, why the identification/reduction of a person with/to her body is indeed degrading. While I would certainly not deny that the experience described by Bartky in this essay of being whistled and hooted at by unknown men across the street is humiliating, and that it involves a reductive move whereby the men deliberately attempt to make Bartky aware that she is *a body on display*, I am concerned about the way in which identifying the humiliation with being made to feel like a "mere body" or "a nice piece of ass" itself buys into negative stereotypes about the body which in turn can reinforce rather than change a negative body image.
>
> (1999, 50; italics in the original)

A theory of personhood that celebrates rather than denigrates embodiment, that approaches the realm of the material as crucial to subjectivity and agency, seems to preclude a critique of objectification per se. No longer can it be said that it is obviously harmful to treat women, or men for that matter, as mere bodies—in fact, the qualifier "mere" or "just" no longer makes sense in relation to embodiment.

The theorists explored above all recognize autonomy as a central element of personhood, and objectification, in some form, as a denial or limitation of a person's autonomy. Even as Patricia Marino criticizes Nussbaum's theory for insufficiently taking into account the "background social and political context" (2008, 346), and giving too much weight to the individual context (a critique which in some ways resonates with one I will present shortly), nevertheless she names the failure to respect a person's autonomy as the central moral problem. Although feminism is correct to insist upon a greater degree of social and political freedom for women, adopting autonomy as a hallmark of personhood is a philosophically dangerous strategy. It risks defining the self as overly atomistic, as properly removed from and prior to relationships, as ideally functioning as an individual without the influence of others. This is a decidedly Enlightenment model, one that ignores the degree to which selves are constructed in the context of environments and relations with other beings. It is also a model that implicitly or explicitly places the body outside of the realm of subjectivity, and that privileges the self-conscious intellect as the primary seat of personhood. Bodies, after all, often do not function in accordance with either intellect or desire; they also, especially at the beginning and usually at the end of a person's life, highlight each individual's inherent dependence on others. It is no accident that for the most part Enlightenment thought considered the body to be a wild machine, one that should be controlled as much as possible.

Trapped as these analyses are within modern models of personhood and subjectivity, it is no wonder that sexuality remains problematic. Certainly both LeMoncheck and Nussbaum are committed to maintaining a space for a healthy, passionate, embodied sexuality for women; their very concern with this issue puts a lie to the claim that feminists who criticize the objectification of women are inherently anti-sex. However, the fact that they wish to maintain this space does not indicate success in that attempt. The problem that seems unsurpassable is that sexuality and sexual experiences demand embodiment—more than this, they (at least potentially) simultaneously enhance one's sense of being a body *and* as a subject. In fact, if anything, positive sexual experiences in their intensity demonstrate the utter foolishness of the mind/body distinction: one cannot have a purely intellectual erotic experience (attempts to describe cyber-sex as disembodied are, I suggest, impoverished).

Moreover, the bodily intensity of sexual encounters, and their potential to be self-enhancing, is usually the product not of autonomy but of interactions between subjects. To be sexual is to be a thing, and often to be the object of another's gaze and attention; the pleasure of being such an object cannot be explained simply by the internalization of a dominance/ submission framework, since we can imagine and even experience such objectification without hierarchy.[4] LeMoncheck and Nussbaum seem at times to acknowledge that this sense of objectification—the status of being the object of another's gaze or attention—is central to eroticism; but by making this distinction, they are admitting that objectification itself is not necessarily problematic. Neither Nussbam's appeal to context nor LeMoncheck's move to "dehumanization" seem sufficient to account for an embodied sexuality that is a central aspect of personhood. At best, they can describe a sexuality that does not contradict personhood—yet even on this point, their arguments are not entirely successful.

This failing is perhaps most striking in Nussbaum's privileging of autonomy. On the one hand, for Nussbaum, the lack of autonomy seems to be the hallmark of the objectified, the thread that connects almost all morally problematic instances of objectification. It would therefore be tempting to claim that it is precisely this lack of autonomy that constitutes the moral harm; however, as Nussbaum notes, erotic encounters are often marked by an experience of loss of subjectivity or autonomy, a melding of persons, whereby each other's being, mood, and experiences are part and parcel of the other's. Nussbaum ultimately defends this loss of autonomy as acceptable and even pleasurable (although she does not quite provide an explanation for why such a loss can be pleasurable) as long as it takes place within a larger context wherein "on the whole, autonomy is respected and promoted" (1995, 275).

This is a rather odd model of sexuality, one which calls for individuals to rather suddenly and temporarily lose their most precious of traits, only to regain it slowly after a sexual encounter. Do sexual experiences therefore (even temporarily) annihilate the person? And if we remain committed to an ethics grounded in autonomous individuality, how could we possibly accept any such annihilation? Remember that Nussbaum is not describing sexual encounters as a limitation of autonomy (which could be read as the appropriate cost of living in any kind of society); rather, she describes them as involving a *loss* of autonomy, of subjectivity, of a sense of one's self as discrete from the other. Given the centrality of autonomy to the moral category of persons, context does not seem sufficient to overcome its moral demands. Moreover, even if we could, as Nussbaum attempts to, render sexual encounters as morally tolerable, how could we explain their potential for pleasure? How could losing that which is most precious to us as moral agents render so much delight, so much joy? Any theory of the person that attempts to account for the moral wrong of objectification must be accompanied by a theory of sexuality that does not oppose it to personhood and subjectivity and, more than this, that can explain how sexuality can enhance one's sense of self and (inter)subjectivity.

Another difficulty in these accounts of objectification is that they claim that the objectified woman is rendered a non-person, lacking in autonomy and subjectivity. However, many stereotypical images of objectified women—say, those in mainstream media or relatively soft-core pornography—do not represent women as utterly object-like, as lacking in the traits and abilities usually associated with persons. As Susan Bordo notes, these women are often portrayed as very particular kinds of subjects, who use language and other forms of expression to communicate specific desires:

> Actually, I find that whole notion [of "sex objects"] misleading, whether applied to men or women, because it seems to suggest that what these representations offer is a body that is inert, depersonalized, flat, a mere thing. In fact, advertisers put a huge amount of time, money, and creativity into figuring out how to create images of beautiful bodies that are heavy on attitude, style, associations with pleasure, success, happiness. The most compelling images are suffused with "subjectivity"—they *speak* to us, they seduce us.
>
> (1999, 186; italics in the original)

The so-called objectified woman is like no other object; she communicates in human language, speaks her (supposed) desire, and generally engages in behavior that certainly no inanimate object could achieve. In fact, it is crucial within both mainstream media and many forms of pornography that the objectified woman be constantly speaking her assent to and delight in whatever actions she is involved in (or whatever actions are being imposed upon her). Part of the eroticism associated with objectification, at least in some forms of pornography, can be found in the representation of the objectified person (not accidentally a woman) as *choosing* to act in a degrading manner. Langton alone recognizes this facet of objectification, terming it a paradoxical affirmation of autonomy that nevertheless forwards the general aim of objectification. But Langton's analysis merely privileges one side of the subject/object dichotomy over the other, reducing the subjective elements of the sex object to her object-hood. What I am arguing here is something quite different: that the sex object cannot be reduced to object-hood, and requires some essential subject-like characteristics. The woman's act of choosing endows her with the minimum of personhood, while still giving license to those who are viewing her to endow her with less respect than persons are usually accorded (if she doesn't respect herself, why should I?). In other words, the objectified woman is not constituted, properly speaking, as an object, but rather as a particular kind of subject: one who has (among other characteristics) little to no concern for the respect she is due from herself and others on account of her personhood. Because of this persistence of (at least the impression of) subjectivity, the notion of objectification cannot quite illuminate the ethical wrongs in these images of women.

Finally, feminist criticisms of objectification are flawed inasmuch as they draw a clear opposition between subject-hood and object-hood: in other words, they assume, for the most part, that while one is an object, one is not a subject, and vice versa. My criticism of this model is similar to my criticism of the model of the person grounded in rationality and autonomy: it cannot account for either the deeply intersubjective nature of human being or the materiality of subjectivity itself. To place being a subject and being an object in such stark opposition denies the fact that as embodied beings we are, and properly so, "objects," both in the sense of being things and in the sense of being the recipient of others' gazes and attention.

To say that human subjectivity is embodied is to argue that materiality is central to human experience itself. Understanding the human subject as a material entity —as something that is always incarnate, always lived as flesh and bone and blood and sinew—allows the recognition of diverse aspects of subjectivity (desire, motility, spatial orientation, for example) that otherwise go ignored. Moreover, repositioning the body as central to subjectivity, rather than peripheral or even hostile to it, allows for the diversity of human experience to take center stage. The allegedly universal and distinctly non-bodily capacities of rationality and autonomy that mark Enlightenment models of the person did not in fact serve to render all humans equal and equally valued. To the contrary, such theories were virtually always accompanied by either explicit or implicit exclusion of many (and overlapping) categories of human beings. Embodiment can serve as both the commonality among human beings and as a site of irreducible difference: all human beings live as bodies, and each human being lives her or his body differently.

Part of the embodied particularity of each human subject can be found in the ways in which that subject (and that subject's body) has interacted with others. Subjectivity (or, more accurately, intersubjectivity) is marked indelibly by being the object of others' attention, desire, care, and consideration. Moreover, to be such an object sometimes necessitates being treated as not quite a full subject.

The most obvious example here is the parent-infant relationship, a relationship which Ann E. Kaplan valorizes as "a *mutual* gazing, rather than the subject-object kind that reduces one of the parties to the place of submission" (1983, 24; italics in the original). Kaplan is quite correct to contrast the parent-infant gaze (which she locates within the "mother–child" relationship, although it is certainly possible that the same dynamic could occur with a father) with the damaging, harmful "male gaze," as described in Laura Mulvey's famous article (1989). However, Kaplan fails to notice that the mutuality of the gaze does not render it symmetrical. Both parent and child may gaze at each other, but they take different meanings from that gaze, and it constructs them differently. Certainly the parent does not gaze upon the infant as a full, autonomous subject, as defined by Enlightenment thought; the infant, most likely, cannot recognize the distinction between itself and the object of its own gaze. Yet that gaze, that perceptual, embodied act, bridges the two beings, constitutes them as members of an asymmetrical relationship, and endows them with, perhaps, certain kinds of subjectivity. The gaze does not render them equals, for the asymmetry between parent and child is profound and foundational. By virtue of the gaze, however, an intersubjective relationship is grounded, a relationship that profoundly impacts the subjectivity of the persons involved in it.

The point of the intersubjective model of personhood—as opposed to models that ground subjectivity in autonomy, freedom, independence—is that agency and personhood are always matters of relations. To be an acting subject is always to be simultaneously active and passive, always (as Merleau-Ponty would put it) touching and touched, always with-others. In terms of the dynamic that is usually termed "objectification," this point may be used to highlight the ways in which the gaze bridging the objectified and the objectifier also constitutes the objectifier in a particular way. The gazer is not only active; the gazed upon is not only passive; both are bound up in a dynamic interaction that endows their subjectivity with particular characteristics and traits. To frame this dynamic in a strict subject-object paradigm is to lose these kinds of subtleties and nuances.

In positioning the body and materiality as peripheral to subjectivity, and highlighting autonomy as a, and often the, defining characteristic of the person, the analyses of Nussbaum, LeMoncheck, and Langton render sexuality—which is necessarily embodied and intersubjective— incomprehensible. Any ethical critique of the phenomena associated with objectification must be grounded in a more compelling model of material intersubjectivity.

CONCLUSION

Having explored these generally accepted feminist analyses of the phenomenon of objectification, let me sum up the philosophical problems that they present. In remaining loyal to certain tenets of modern thought, such as a privileging of autonomy and rationality in subjectivity, they fail to recognize sufficiently the role the body plays in subjectivity. This failure, despite the theorists' best efforts to articulate the conditions of positive sexual interactions, leads to an implicit vilification of the body and at times of sexuality itself. Crucial questions about sexuality and subjectivity remain: how can objectionable and nonobjectionable erotic encounters be distinguished from each other? How can feminist thought account for the pleasure that can derive from being gazed upon, being perceived and approached as sexually attractive, and being erotically involved with other bodies? How can it explain the sense that such erotic involvements can serve not to destroy or undermine subjectivity, but rather to enhance our sense of being-with?

In a related point, these theories tend to leave us in a space where materiality and passivity are linked indelibly to a lack of subjectivity—a conclusion that places severe and ultimately untenable constraints upon subjectivity, agency, and personhood. Again, inherent in the pejorative sense of the word "objectification" is the assumption that to be an object, a material thing, is contrary to subjectivity and its most valuable trait, autonomy. In turn, the privileging of autonomy leaves little room to explore the ways in which relations constitute the self and its ability to act in the world.

Finally, it seems that these analyses do not sufficiently illuminate some paradigmatic examples of the objectification of women. Women as sex objects are often not comparable to other objects, particularly inanimate ones—they seem to occupy an odd, confusing space between subject and object, a space perhaps that does not recognize the subject/object distinction, but complicates and troubles it. In any case, this space is not effectively described by mere reference to turning women into "things"— something more complicated and more subtle is going on here.

Despite all these difficulties with the concept of objectification, feminists still need conceptual tools with which to explore and clarify the ethical harms of phenomena associated with objectification (such as prostitution and pornography). What is needed, then, is a way of analyzing these phenomena without falling into the trap of alienating the body or the other from the self. Such a new conceptual tool, one that recognizes the centrality of the body to intersubjectivity, must be able to describe in detail a sexuality that is not ethically problematic, that functions to enhance human flourishing, and that embraces embodiment with neither suspicion nor shame. It must account for human subjects as feeling bodies: bodies whose very self-constitution demands both feeling and being felt, bodies who crave both the recognition of their bodily existence and the experience of recognizing the bodily existence of another, bodies whose bodies matter.

2
Derivatization

As the last chapter demonstrated, the concept of objectification is closely connected with an implicit vilification and marginalization of the body, as well as a failure to recognize the intersubjectivity that marks the embodied human being. The challenge emanating from this critique is to develop a conceptual tool capable of illuminating the ethical wrongs and harms inherent in the various phenomena usually categorized under objectification while simultaneously recognizing the importance of the body and the other to the subjective self. In this chapter, I offer as an alternative to the concept of "objectification" the concept of "derivatization" to be understood within a context of recognition of sexual difference. As I present this alternative, and work through some examples that illustrate it, I will return insistently to two insights regarding the existing theories of objectification: 1) that they cannot account for the pleasure that can derive from being treated as a body, and thus make ethically problematic that which in fact appropriately enhances a flourishing sense of self; and 2) that their focus on what they consider to be ethically problematic conflations of the categories of "person" and "object" causes them to misdiagnose the ethical harms of phenomena that contribute to gender inequality.

Before delving into the philosophical underpinnings of this idea, let me offer a brief description of it. Grammatically, it follows the structure of the term to be replaced; if "objectify" means to "turn into an object," then "derivatize" means to "turn into a derivative." To derivatize is to portray, render, understand, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection, or expression of another being's identity, desires, fears, etc. The derivatized subject becomes reducible in all relevant ways to the derivatizing subject's existence—other elements of her (as I will argue in the next chapter, women are far more likely than men to be derivatized) being or subjectivity are disregarded, ignored, or undervalued. Should the derivatized subject dare to demonstrate aspects of her subjectivity that fall outside of the derivatizer's being—assuming such a demonstration can even be perceived (it may well be so incomprehensible so as to be beyond the perceptual range of the derivatizer)—she will be perceived as arrogant, treasonous, and dangerously rebellious.

Derivatization can function in a variety of social and political situations. Many forms of work, most notably the kind found in service industries, involve various manifestations of derivatization. The hostess at the fine restaurant must smile and make pleasant small talk while escorting the diners to their table—this is not a matter of sheer usefulness (the diners could probably find their own way to the table if it were pointed out to them) but rather an indulging of the diner's alleged desires to interact with a friendly, hospitable person. When sports fans demand of their heroes not only excellent athletic performance, but also the fulfillment of certain moral standards in their personal life, they are requiring those heroes to embody and represent the fans' desired ideals (regardless of whether the fans themselves live up to those same ideals).

Derivatization, then, is not limited to interactions that are distinctly sexual, or explicitly engage with the sexuate identities of individuals. Yet for the purposes of this and several other chapters, I will focus primarily on sexual derivatization, as my concerns center on sexual inequality. Although many of the insights that are gained from the exploration of this particular form of derivatization may apply to other examples, and although none of these social spheres are, strictly speaking, distinct from one another, it may well be that the quality of any given case of derivatization is ineluctably marked by the sphere within which it takes place. And so whereas sexual derivatization may serve as a productive starting point for a discussion of the phenomenon, it will not exhaust its political and ethical meanings, a broader scope of which will be explored in the final chapter.

The sexually derivatized subject is not quite a non-person. She may express desires, emotions, and preferences; she may articulate consent or the lack thereof (especially when the lack of consent only heightens the erotic nature of the encounter); she may even play a role of alleged dominance in relation to the derivatizer. One may understand a dominatrix, for example, as a sexually derivatized woman: despite the fact that she takes up an absolutely authoritarian role, defined by and replete with power and domination, still the raison d'etre of the dynamic (and indeed the being and behavior of the dominatrix) is entirely reducible to the needs and desires of the submissive. It would be laughable to consider a dominatrix a "thing," or an "object," if by those terms we mean a "non-person." Indeed, the dominatrix is not being treated as a thing in any of the ways that, for example, Nussbaum articulates. She does not lack autonomy (indeed, she's at least nominally, but in a distinctly real way, in charge), nor is she clearly being used as an instrument. Instead, she is required to use the submissive as an instrument. She is in no way similar to inanimate objects, and in fact must express and embody the particular subjectivity demanded by the role with total consistency. The derivatized subject exhibits (and, I would argue, experiences) a particular kind of subjectivity—a subjectivity that is stunted, or muted, as I argue later, but a subjectivity nonetheless.

The problem with the behaviors and images usually associated with sexual objectification is not that they render women things, and therefore not-subjects, or, as Nussbaum would have it, that they represent the inappropriate transposition of thing-like characteristics to women. Such a diagnosis, even through the mediating values of autonomy and non-instrumentality, inevitably opposes the figures of "woman" and "material entity." As I see it, the ethical problem with such behaviors and images constitutes an ontological mistake of a different sort, whereby feminine subjectivity and sexuality are constructed as wholly derivative of masculine subjectivity and sexuality.

The desires, actions, and choices of derivatized women are required to mirror nothing but the desires of men. Beyond those desires, a derivatized woman cannot exist, cannot speak, and cannot act. The dominatrix is not allowed to say, "You know, I'm tired of dominating you. Let's try interacting as equals for a change." Female prostitutes must enact personalities and roles that have been constructed as sexually appealing to men. The prostitute who feels the sexiest when dressed in a loose, Grecian gown, and insists on wearing such a costume, is hardly likely to attract a significant clientèle. She has made the mistake of assuming that *her* definition and experience of sexiness is relevant, rather than fulfilling the roles and images that (heterosexual) *men* (are supposed to) find sexy. Similarly, women who are sexually harassed are implicitly called upon to play a particular role, and if they fail to go along with the harassment in good humor and with little real resistance, they have demonstrated their refusal to act within the bounds of the proscribed relationship. And for saying, "I am more and other than the person you are constructing me as"—for resisting the move of derivatization—they often inspire scorn, anger, and retribution. They have overstepped their bounds by claiming a subjectivity that exceeds that of the derivatizer.

The harms of sexual derivatization are distinct from the harms of objectification as explored by LeMoncheck, Nussbaum, and Langton. Most concretely, the moral category of "person," as defined by characteristics that are necessarily non-bodily is not in use. Sexual derivatization is not constituted by the denial of autonomy, which Nussbaum names as perhaps the most salient way in which persons are inappropriately treated as persons. Some sexually derivatized persons engage in recognizable autonomy; moreover, the theory of embodied intersubjectivity that I articulated in the last chapter holds that individuals are never entirely "in charge" of their own subjectivity, and thus the lack of autonomy cannot serve as a necessary trait of unethical phenomena. Nor are the harms of derivatization to be found in the treatment of the person as a thing. The derivatized person is not presented as an object, nor is she treated in ways relevantly similar to the ways objects (understood as nonsentient physical entities) are often treated. Although various aspects of the derivatized person's physical being may be used as a means of derivatization, her status as a material being is not the core of the ethical problem. Materiality itself is not the difficulty here, nor can it be, if a consistently embodied model of the self is at work.

Perhaps the closest association between derivatization and contemporary feminist analyses of objectification could be found in relation to instrumentalization. Might the aforementioned dominatrix and the prostitute be aptly described as mere instruments, means to the paying customer's ends? But here too the diagnosis misses the mark. To begin with, the notion of instrumentalization is deeply connected to materiality, whereby an instrument is conceptualized as a thing that is utilized by the active subject toward that active subject's ends. Hence Kant's insistence that sexual interaction, by which individuals obtain pleasure or satisfaction from the

other's bodies, necessarily involves objectification. Nussbaum, too, when considering what appear to be ethically acceptable examples of instrumentalization (using the lover's stomach as a pillow), highlights the lover as bodily entity, and ultimately concludes that only a surrounding context that respects the individual's autonomy can justify these kinds of actions. But to the extent that the dominatrix and the prostitute are being used, they are not being used like inanimate objects are used—for one thing, their use relies on their ability to emote, to choose, to discern. In the case of the dominatrix, as mentioned earlier, her very *ability touse* (an ability reserved for subjects) is what is being used.

In fact, what is often exploited or used in a case of derivatization is not the derivatized woman's body as body, as thing: it is her body as subject, as the site of her sentience and her potential for agency, that is targeted. Objectification as currently understood involves a necessary opposition between body-as-thing and person-as-subject (which explains why Nussbaum can only justify treating a lover's body as a thing if there is an overarching, which is to say, superseding, recognition of the lover as a person endowed with the non-bodily characteristic of autonomy), and thus cannot aptly explicate the ethical harms of phenomena which exploit the intersubjective vulnerability of the body-as-subject. And—equally as importantly—the explications which they do produce make the body-as-subject incomprehensible, resulting in a distinctly disembodied, perhaps even somataphobic, ethics.

The ethical harms of sexual derivatization are thus quite conceptually distinct from the harms imposed by objectification, as that idea has been developed in feminist scholarship. As a philosophical tool, objectification is structured by a Kantian framework, one that prioritizes autonomy and the subject's right to be an end in itself. Derivatization requires its own framework, and for that purpose I turn to Luce Irigaray's work on sexual difference. Irigaray is certainly not the only feminist philosopher to engage the notion of sexual difference, but her treatment of it, although complex, is also one of the most compelling. It provides an argument for the ethical imperative of recognizing sexual difference as an ontological factor, such that the different sexes are constituted as distinct from each other, non-complementary, and non-reducible to each other—an argument that can illuminate how and why derivatization imposes harms on persons.