



What is Objectification?*

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Abstract

Objectification is a notion central to contemporary feminist theory. It has famously been associated with the work of anti-pornography feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, and more recently with the work of Martha Nussbaum. However, objectification is a notion that has not yet been adequately defined. It has been used rather vaguely to refer to a broad range of cases involving, in some way or another, the treatment of a person (usually a woman) *as an object*. My purpose in this paper is to offer a plausible understanding of objectification. I do that by focusing on the work of four prominent thinkers: Immanuel Kant, and contemporary feminists Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin and Martha Nussbaum. Through drawing on these thinkers' conceptions of objectification, I am finally led to a more complete and coherent understanding of this notion.

Keywords

Dworkin, feminism, Kant, MacKinnon, Nussbaum, objectification

Objectification is a notion central to contemporary feminist theory. It has famously been associated with the work of anti-pornography feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who have argued that due to men's consumption of pornography women as a group are objectified. More recently, it has been associated with Martha Nussbaum, who has done some remarkable work exploring both the negative and the positive aspects involved in objectification. However, objectification is a notion that has not yet been adequately defined. It has been used rather vaguely to refer to a broad range of cases involving, in some way or another, the treatment of a person (usually a woman) *as an object*. My purpose in this paper is to offer a plausible account

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of objectification. I do that by focusing on the work of four prominent thinkers: Immanuel Kant, and contemporary feminists Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin and Martha Nussbaum.

Section one provides an analysis of these thinkers' accounts of objectification. Section two deals with the problems these accounts face. In section three, finally, I put forward a more complete and coherent conception of objectification. My suggested conception is more inclusive than the one defended by Kant and feminists MacKinnon and Dworkin, according to which objectification necessarily has harmful consequences to an individual's humanity (their rational nature and capacities).¹ Yet it is less inclusive than Nussbaum's broad conception, which allows most of the ways we ordinarily see and treat each other in our daily lives to count as objectification. Furthermore, I point out that, contrary to popular belief, objectification is not in all cases intentional; that is, the objectifier does not always have the intention to objectify another person, but is in fact ignorant of his own objectifying behaviour. Similarly, the victim of objectification is often unaware that they are being objectified. This suggests that in order to fight at least some instances of objectification we must first and foremost educate people (both men and women) to recognize objectifying behaviours.

1. Two Main Conceptions of Objectification

For Kant, objectification involves *treating* a person as an object, in the sense of a mere instrument for someone else's purposes, and consequently *reducing* this individual to the status of a mere instrument. Objectification, then, is a necessarily negative phenomenon because it involves seriously harming a person's humanity. In being reduced to a mere thing for use, the objectified individual's humanity is diminished.

According to Kant, *humanity* is an individual's rational nature and capacity for rational choice. The characteristic feature of humanity is the capacity for rationally setting and pursuing one's own ends. A being with humanity is capable of deciding what is valuable, and of finding ways to realize and promote this value. Humanity is what is special about human beings.

¹ The idea that Kant's conception of objectification has important similarities to the conception adopted by feminists MacKinnon and Dworkin has originally been defended by Barbara Herman in her landmark article, 'Could it be Worth Thinking about Kant on Sex and Marriage?' in Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (eds.), *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

It distinguishes them from animals and from inanimate objects. Because human beings are special in this sense they have, unlike animals and objects, a *dignity* (an ‘inner worth’, as opposed to a ‘relative worth’).² Kant explains:

Humanity itself is a dignity; for a man cannot be used merely as a means by any man (either by others or even by himself) but must always be used at the same time as an end. It is just in this that his dignity (personality) consists, by which he raises himself above all other beings in the world that are not men and yet can be used, and so over all *things*.³

It is crucial, then, for Kant, that humanity is never treated merely as a means, but always as an end in itself.⁴

Kant is worried that when people exercise their sexuality outside the context of monogamous marriage, they treat humanity merely as a means for their sexual purposes. In the *Lectures on Ethics* Kant often speaks about ‘degradation’, ‘debasement’ and ‘dishonouring’ of humanity when exercise of sexuality is involved. He goes so far as to say that sexual activity leads to the loss or ‘sacrifice’ of humanity.⁵ ‘In loving from sexual inclination’, he writes, ‘they *make* the person into an object of appetite’.⁶ Kant thought that in theory both men and women can be objectified, but he was well aware that in practice women are the most common victims of objectification.⁷

The loved person, then, is, according to what Kant writes in the *Lectures on Ethics*, ‘*made* into an *object of appetite*’; she ‘*is in fact a thing...and can be misused as such a thing by anybody*’.⁸ The woman in question is not merely treated as a thing but, rather, she is made into a thing. In this way, her humanity

² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (ed. Mary Gregor; Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 42 (4:434–4:435).

³ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (trans. Mary Gregor; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 209 (6:462).

⁴ It is important to note here that Kant distinguishes treating a person as a mere means from failing to treat a person as an end. Treating as a mere means is always a way of failing to treat as an end, but the converse does not hold. In the case of violating imperfect duties (for example, the duty to beneficence and self-perfection) we do not treat someone as a mere means, although we do fail to treat them as an end.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (trans. Peter Heath; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 155–56 (27:384–27:385).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155 (27:384) (my emphasis).

⁷ This is obvious in Kant’s discussions of prostitution and concubinage. Exercise of sexuality within these two morally problematic sexual contexts leads to the reduction of the *woman* to the status of an object for the man’s use.

⁸ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 156 (27:385) (my emphasis).

is ‘sacrificed’.⁹ This reduction to object does not seem to occur only at the time when she is sexually used by her partner, but continues far beyond this use. After being sexually used, the loved individual has acquired the status of a thing, and can thus be used as a thing by everyone else.¹⁰ In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant seems to allow for the possibility that the loved individual’s humanity is harmed during the sex act only. He writes that ‘in this act [the sexual act] a human being makes himself into a thing’.¹¹ What is clear in both the *Lectures on Ethics* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, however, is that the humanity of the sexually used individual is seriously harmed, regardless of whether we take this harm to be of a permanent nature, or adopt the more optimistic line of the *Metaphysics of Morals* that objectification is confined in the sex act.¹²

MacKinnon and Dworkin describe the phenomenon of objectification in strikingly similar terms. For these feminists, however, only women can be the victims of objectification. In our patriarchal societies, women are necessarily the objectified, and men their objectifiers. It is important to note that, for MacKinnon and Dworkin, a person’s *gender* is clearly distinguished from a person’s *sex*. Gender, being a man or a woman, is socially constructed, whereas sex, being male or female, is biologically defined. Even though the feminists in question do acknowledge that a female (sex) individual can be an objectifier and a male (sex) individual can be objectified, they take it that the former is a man and the latter is a woman, since in their view a man (gender) is by definition the objectifier and a woman (gender) is by definition the objectified.¹³

⁹ Ibid., p.156 (27:385). A similar ‘sacrifice’ of humanity is also present, for Kant, in masturbation, where the individual is using their own humanity as a mere means for sexual pleasure, and ‘thereby forfeits his person, and degrades himself lower than a beast’ (ibid., p. 161 (27:391)).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 163.

¹¹ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 62 (6:278).

¹² In the recent literature, interpreters of Kant are divided as to whether the harm to humanity caused by sex is one that extends beyond sexual use or not. Wilson suggests that the former is the case, when he writes that the sexually objectified individual is reduced to an object ‘both in the eyes of one’s partner and the wider community... [and] thereby run[s] a moral risk—the risk of ceasing to be a person for all others’ (Donald Wilson, ‘Kant and the Marriage Right’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 [2004], p. 107). Soble believes that the harm to humanity occurs during sex. He states that ‘during the sex act...a person loses control of himself and loses regard for the humanity of the other’ (Alan Soble, ‘Sexual Use and What to Do about it: Internalist and Externalist Sexual Ethics’, in Alan Soble [ed.], *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings* [London: Rowman & Littlefield, 4th edn, 2002], p. 266).

¹³ Catherine MacKinnon discusses this distinction between sex and gender in her books: *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 6, 32–45, 50, and *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989),

Following Kant, Dworkin describes the harm done to the objectified woman's humanity in our society:

Objectification occurs when a human being... is *made less than human, turned into a thing* or commodity. When objectification occurs, a person is *depersonalized*... those who can be used as if they are not fully human are no longer fully human...¹⁴

Objectification, Dworkin furthermore adds, is the 'reduction of humanity into being an object for sex'; the objectified woman is 'something, not someone'.¹⁵ As Nussbaum also acknowledges, for Dworkin, like for Kant, the 'central moral sin' involved in objectification is treating a human being as a mere object, a mere tool for the ends of others.¹⁶ MacKinnon is no less pessimistic than Kant and Dworkin in her description of the objectified individual's status. Women, she states, are 'dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities... reduced to body parts'. 'She [a woman] becomes something to be used by him, specifically, an object of his sexual use'.¹⁷

For MacKinnon and Dworkin, clearly, women's objectification does not occur only when they are sexually used by men. Rather, these feminists share Kant's pessimism in the *Lectures on Ethics* that the harm to women's humanity is of a more permanent and pervasive nature; it characterizes every aspect of our patriarchal societies.¹⁸ Furthermore, it is important to note that, for MacKinnon and Dworkin, unlike for Kant, a woman's humanity can be harmed by male consumers of pornography, even if the two never have direct contact. MacKinnon writes: 'Men *treat* women as who they see women as

pp. 113-14, 128, 137-40. For an illuminating analysis of MacKinnon's views on sex and gender see Sally Haslanger, 'On Being Objective and Being Objectified', in Antony and Witt (eds.), *A Mind of One's Own*, pp. 98-101.

¹⁴ Andrea Dworkin, 'Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality', in Cornell Drucilla (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Feminism: Feminism and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 19-44, 30-31; my emphasis.

¹⁵ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), pp. 14, 140-41.

¹⁶ Martha Nussbaum, 'Rage and Reason', in *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 243.

¹⁷ MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, pp. 176, 138.

¹⁸ In fact, these feminists have argued that objectification is so widespread in our societies that it is often 'masked' as objectivity. For more on the epistemological aspects of objectification and its connection to objectivity see Haslanger, 'On Being Objective and Being Objectified'; Rae Langton, 'Beyond a Pragmatic Critique of Reason', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71.4 (1993) pp. 364-384; Rae Langton, 'Feminism in Epistemology: Exclusion and Objectification', in M. Fricker and J. Hornsby (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); L. Papadaki, 'Women's Objectification and the Norm of Assumed Objectivity', forthcoming in *Episteme* vol. 5, issue 2, 2008, pp. 239-250.

being. Pornography constructs who that is. Men's power over women means that the way men *see* women defines who women can be'.¹⁹ These feminists believe that pornography harms *all* women's humanity by defining them as sexually submissive and objectified.

Once an individual (a woman, in MacKinnon's and Dworkin's case) has acquired this status of a mere thing for use, she can be treated in more object-like ways. Kant seems to be concerned that the objectified individual is not treated as a being with autonomy and subjectivity. Dworkin and MacKinnon are particularly concerned that women's instrumentalization is very likely to also lead to violability. If women are nothing more than things, violating women is, according to these feminists, of little, if any, moral significance.²⁰ Although one might wish to add here that, if women are things, as these feminists argue, it becomes *impossible* to violate them, since violation implies that there is some autonomy to be violated.²¹

Objectification, then, for Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin, is a highly problematic phenomenon, something we should always try to avoid and fight against. Objectification, under these thinkers' conception, constitutes seriously harming an individual's humanity. The objectified individual's rational capacities are impaired and she is reduced to the status of a thing, something with no autonomy or subjectivity that exists solely to be used, and possibly also violated and abused, by others.

Nussbaum conceives objectification in a much broader way than Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin. Objectification, for her, is seeing and/or treating a

¹⁹ MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 172; my emphasis. Even though MacKinnon blurs the boundaries between seeing and treating as an object by classifying pornography as a harmful speech act (see also MacKinnon's discussion of pornography in *Only Words* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993]), it should be made clear that *treating* as an object is, for her, necessary in order for objectification to take place. This point is also emphasized by Haslanger, who explains that objectification, for MacKinnon, 'is not just "in the head"; it is actualized, embodied, imposed upon the objects of one's desire. So if one objectifies something, one not only views it as something which would satisfy one's desire, but also has the power to make it have the desired properties' (Haslanger, 'On Being Objective and Being Objectified', pp. 102-103).

²⁰ MacKinnon vividly compares women to cups, things of merely instrumental value that are there for us to use and even break (MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 138).

²¹ MacKinnon and Dworkin have also famously expressed the concern that objectification which occurs through pornography silences women, making their public voice ineffective. There is no space in this article to discuss the connection between use of pornography and women's silencing. For interesting discussions of this topic, see MacKinnon, *Only Words*; Rae Langton, 'Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22.4 (1993) pp. 305-330; Rae Langton and Jennifer Hornsby, 'Free Speech and Illocution', *Legal Theory* 4 (1998); Jennifer Saul, 'Pornography, Speech Acts, and Context', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106.2 (2006) pp. 229-248.

person as an object. She emphasizes the fact that ‘objectification [involves] treating one thing as another’. One is treating as an object what is *not* an object, but a human being.²² Nussbaum explains that the following seven notions are involved in the idea of objectification:

1. *Instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool for his or her purposes.
2. *Denial of autonomy*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. *Inertness*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
4. *Fungibility*: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
5. *Violability*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. *Ownership*: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. *Denial of subjectivity*: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.²³

A person, according to Nussbaum, is seen and/or treated as an object, when they are seen and/or treated in one or more of the seven ways on her list. Instrumentality, then, which is the core notion of Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin’s conception of objectification, is, as Nussbaum explains, only one of the ways a person can be treated as an object. Objectification, as Nussbaum rightly emphasizes, often involves treatment other than the instrumentalization of a human being.²⁴

This is not to say that Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin took objectification to involve nothing more apart from instrumentalization. Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin would all agree that the objectified individual is denied autonomy

²² Martha Nussbaum, ‘Objectification’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24.4 (1995), pp. 256–57; Martha Nussbaum, ‘Feminism, Virtue, and Objectification’, in R. Halwani (ed.), *Sex and Ethics: Essays on Sexuality, Virtue, and the Good Life* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 50. In defining objectification as treating as an object what is *not* an object, Nussbaum seems to disregard the fact that human beings are in important respects like objects (we are visible, have mass and extension, etc.). This is an interesting view put forward by Leslie Green in his article ‘Pornographies’, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8 (2000), pp. 27–52.

²³ Nussbaum, ‘Objectification’ (1995), p. 257.

²⁴ Nonetheless, Nussbaum takes instrumentality to be ‘the most basic notion—the one that shows us most centrally why sexual objectification is wrong’ (Nussbaum, ‘Feminism, Virtue, and Objectification’, p. 50).

and subjectivity. And MacKinnon and Dworkin, as already mentioned, feared that the objectified woman is in great danger of being violated and abused. It is Nussbaum, however, who has explicitly suggested that objectification need not be defined solely in terms of instrumentalization, and the one who has done systematic work analysing the seven notions involved in the phenomenon of objectification.

Objectification, for Nussbaum, need not have the harmful consequences to a person's humanity that Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin feared. Nussbaum criticizes MacKinnon and Dworkin (and indirectly, to an extent, also Kant) for taking objectification to be necessarily negative, a phenomenon that inevitably involves seriously harming a person's humanity. She accuses MacKinnon and Dworkin of being 'insufficiently sensitive' to the 'human complexities', and of not caring to examine the overall context of various human relationships, before condemning all objectification as negative.²⁵ Nussbaum suggests that it is indeed possible that: 'some features of objectification... may in fact in some circumstances... be even wonderful features of sexual life', and so 'the term objectification can also be used... in a more positive spirit'.²⁶ And she adds: 'Seeing this will require... seeing how the allegedly impossible combination between (a form of) objectification and "equality, respect, and consent" might after all be possible'.²⁷

According to Nussbaum, then, objectification can either be *benign/positive* or *negative*. It is benign/positive when it has a neutral or even a beneficial effect on the objectified person's humanity, and negative when it affects the objectified individual's humanity in a detrimental way.

Let us see in more detail what is involved in Nussbaum's category of negative objectification. Negative objectification is seeing and/or treating a person as an object, in such a way that this person's humanity is *denied*. Even though Nussbaum does not explicitly mention this, it is clear that negative objectification does not necessarily involve causing some *harm* to a person's humanity. In only one of the negative objectification cases she discusses, the case of Isabelle in the passage from Hankinson's novel *Isabelle and Veronique*, is the objectified individual's humanity harmed. This passage from Hankinson involves a rape scene: The heroine, Isabelle, is raped and physically hurt by a man (Macrae), and she is furthermore presented as enjoying this sort of treatment. Macrae treats Isabelle as a mere instrument for the gratification of his sexual desires,

²⁵ Nussbaum, 'Objectification' (1995), p. 273.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 250-51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

and also as something that is permissible to violate and abuse in any way he wishes. Furthermore, Isabelle is completely denied autonomy. Macrae controls Isabelle's conduct in every way and dictates how she will behave. Moreover, he completely denies Isabelle's subjectivity: he treats Isabelle as something whose feelings and thoughts need not be taken into consideration. Finally, in Hankinson's passage, Isabelle is presented as completely inert: she is a passive creature used for the satisfaction of Macrae's desires.²⁸

This case of objectification includes five out of the seven notions on Nussbaum's list: instrumentalization, autonomy and subjectivity-denial, treatment as inert, and violability. As a result of being treated in these ways (and especially through her experience of intense physical pain), Isabelle's humanity is hurt, that is, her rational capacities are seriously impaired. The heroine comes to regard herself, not as an agent with humanity, but as nothing more than an object. Through her objectification, Isabelle comes to be a passive creature that exists solely to be used and violated by others.

The majority of Nussbaum's cases of negative objectification, however, are ones in which people's humanity is *ignored* or not *properly acknowledged*, yet not in some way harmed. Take the example Nussbaum discusses of the two heroes in Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*, for instance. In the passage Nussbaum focuses on, Adam and Maggie, two rich art collectors, treat their spouses, Charlotte and the Prince, as fine antique furniture. This example of objectification involves all seven notions on Nussbaum's list, except physical violability. Charlotte and the Prince are treated as mere means for their spouses' purposes; they are completely denied subjectivity and autonomy, they are treated as inert (lacking in agency and activity), as fungible with other art objects, and as their spouses' property (as owned).²⁹ Maggie and Adam, then, do not acknowledge the fact that Charlotte and the Prince have humanity (rational capacities), and treat them as nothing more than beautiful objects. The objectified individuals' rational capacities, however, are not in any way harmed; Charlotte and the Prince still possess and exercise such capacities, even though these are completely ignored by their partners.³⁰

So, for Nussbaum, negative objectification is seeing and/or treating a person as an object, in a way that this person's humanity is denied. As we have said, one can deny another's humanity by harming their humanity, or simply by ignoring/not properly acknowledging their humanity. Nussbaum's category

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 279-83.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 288-89.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 253-54, 288-89.

of negative objectification, then, is broader than Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's category of objectification, which necessarily involves harm to humanity.

Let us now move to Nussbaum's category of benign/positive objectification. Benign/positive objectification is seeing and/or treating a person as an object (in one or more of the seven ways suggested by Nussbaum), in such a way that their humanity is not in any way denied. In benign/positive cases of objectification, the objectified individual's humanity is properly acknowledged, and in some cases it is even promoted when he or she is seen and/or treated as an object. The case of the Lawrentian lovers in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is, according to Nussbaum, one such example in which people's humanity is benefited through objectification.

The passage from *Lady Chatterley* that Nussbaum quotes in her article describes a sex scene between two lovers. In a context characterized by equality and mutuality between the two parties, Connie and Mellor identify each other with their body parts: according to Nussbaum, 'both parties put aside their individuality and become identified with their bodily organs. They see one another in terms of those organs'.³¹ This leads the two lovers to deny each other's autonomy and subjectivity, *when engaging in the sex act*. As Nussbaum notes, however:

When there is loss of autonomy in sex, the context is...one in which on the whole, autonomy is respected and promoted... Again, when there is loss of 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...³²

Furthermore, Nussbaum emphasizes the fact that in this example Connie and Mellor do not see and treat each other *merely* as tools for their purposes. Even though they do treat each other instrumentally to gain sexual pleasure, overall in their relationship they treat each other as more than mere instruments; as ends in themselves. Connie and Mellor therefore treat each other as objects in a way that is consistent with respecting each other's humanity. Not only does each of the two lovers take into consideration the fact that the other is a being with humanity, but he or she furthermore tries to promote the other's humanity. As Nussbaum also emphasizes in her latest essay on objectification, a person's 'chosen resignation of autonomous self-direction, or her willed passivity may be compatible with, and even a valued part of, a relationship in which the woman is treated as an end for her own sake...as a full fledged human being'.³³

³¹ Ibid., p. 274.

³² Ibid., pp. 275-76.

³³ Nussbaum, 'Feminism, Virtue, and Objectification', p. 51.

To summarize, Nussbaum's conception of objectification is broader than Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's because: (a) negative objectification, for Nussbaum, does not necessarily involve harming a person's humanity. A person can be objectified in a morally problematic way even if their humanity is ignored/not adequately acknowledged, yet not in any way harmed; (b) Nussbaum, unlike Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin, believes that there is such a thing as benign/positive objectification. A person can be objectified in cases where their humanity is properly acknowledged and even promoted; (c) objectification, both negative and positive, for Nussbaum, does not necessarily involve *treating* a person as an object, but can merely involve *seeing* them as an object.

2. Problems with these Two Conceptions

The question that arises at this point is which of these two conceptions of objectification we should favour. On the one hand, we have Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's rather narrow conception, according to which objectification is the treatment of a person as a mere tool for another's purposes, and the subsequent reduction of this person to the status of a mere thing for use. Since objectification, for the thinkers in question, involves seriously harming the objectified individual's humanity, it is necessarily considered to be a negative phenomenon. On the other hand, there is Nussbaum's broader conception, which includes negative objectification (seeing and/or treating a person as an object in such a way that their humanity is in some way denied) and benign/positive objectification (seeing and/or treating a person as an object, in such a way that their humanity is not denied, and might even be promoted). As we will see in this section, both these conceptions of objectification are not without problems.

Let us start with Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's conception of objectification, which, as I will argue, is overly narrow. According to them, the treatment of a person as a mere instrument inevitably leads to a serious harm to the objectified individual's humanity: her rational nature and capacity for rational choice. As a consequence of objectification, a person's humanity is impaired, diminished, or even, to use Kant's strong language, 'sacrificed'.³⁴

However, the claim that treating a person as a mere instrument necessarily leads to seriously harming their humanity is extreme, and one might wish to question its plausibility. Take sexual objectification, for example. In his

³⁴ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 156 (27:385).

pessimistic moments, Kant holds that, outside of the context of monogamous marriage, the sexually used individual *becomes* a thing, and can be used and treated as such by everyone.³⁵ We might further wish to question Kant's more restricted claim in the *Metaphysics of Morals* that humanity is seriously damaged *in the sex act*.

Does it make sense to think that the sexually used individual's rational capacities necessarily are impaired, even completely lost ('sacrificed'), permanently or in the sex act? This claim is overly strong. Most of us think that a person's being used by somebody else as a mere sexual instrument does not inevitably lead to their rational capacities being seriously damaged. At most, we could perhaps accept that this harm to the sexually used person's humanity may take place in some cases. It seems reasonable, then, to want to favour a more inclusive conception of objectification than Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's: a conception involving the treatment of a person as an object in a way that does not necessarily lead to seriously harming this person's humanity.

One is made to think at this point that Nussbaum's conception of objectification should be preferred over Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's conception. Objectification, for Nussbaum, does not necessarily involve harming an individual's humanity. Negative objectification most commonly involves denying an individual's humanity, in the sense of ignoring/not fully acknowledging their humanity. By conceiving objectification in this way, Nussbaum manages to avoid the problem that Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's conception faces: that it is unreasonably narrow. And this is exactly what we want, as mentioned earlier: a more inclusive conception of objectification.

Since we are better off with a broader conception of objectification, then, should we just go ahead and adopt Nussbaum's own conception? Tempting as this might sound, we should be aware that Nussbaum's conception might not

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156 (27:385) (my emphasis). Kant might have been led to the strong claim that treating a person as a mere sexual instrument results in the loss of their humanity because the risks of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy were very real at his time, affecting powerless women's lives in particular. According to him, using another person functionally in this way may lead to the destruction of one or other parties 'through infection, exhaustion, or impregnation' (Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence* [trans. and ed. Arnulf Sweig; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], Letter to Schutz, 10 July 1797). Of course, these empirical dangers are not what Kant's argument is based in. However, if sexual use leads to harm to a person's physical integrity, then it is plausible to assume that it can also harm this individual's humanity (rational capacities). In a quite similar manner, MacKinnon and Dworkin fear that using women as mere sexual tools will inevitably lead to violence and abuse against them. Women's physical integrity, as well as their humanity, then, is for these feminists as well as for Kant at great risk.

be quite as appealing as it initially looks. Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's conception, as we have seen, is overly narrow. Nussbaum's conception faces the opposite problem: it is overly broad. And, as I will argue, there is reason not to favour as broad a conception of objectification as Nussbaum's.

Nussbaum's category of benign/positive objectification, as we have seen, includes cases in which a person is seen and/or treated as an object in ways such that their humanity is not denied, and might even be promoted. If we call all these cases 'objectification', then our objectification category becomes unreasonably broad.

Take one of Nussbaum's seven notions, 'instrumentality', the treatment of a person as a tool for someone's purposes. Now, consider what would happen if every time we treated each other instrumentally, without such treatment denying humanity in any way, we called this 'objectification'. It would mean that in our everyday lives we objectify nearly everyone: partners, teachers, taxi drivers, waiters, plumbers and everyone else we use as a means to achieve our ends. Furthermore, it would mean that we constantly objectify ourselves, since, one might think, we also use ourselves as means to achieve our ends (we cook in order to eat, we walk to reach a destination, we work to make a living, etc.). We use each other, as well as ourselves, instrumentally all the time, and it seems unreasonable to want to call all such instrumental treatment objectification.

Consider also that, according to Nussbaum's broader conception, objectification can merely involve *seeing* a person as an object (*treating* as an object is not for Nussbaum necessary in order for objectification to take place).³⁶ Focusing again on instrumentality, if I consider catching a passing taxi to get home, but then change my mind and decide to walk instead, I have nonetheless objectified the taxi driver, in seeing him as an instrument to achieve my purpose. Furthermore, in this case, I also seem to have objectified myself in seeing and treating myself as an instrument to achieve my purpose of reaching home.

Our objectification category is already too broad, and we have only been dealing with just one of Nussbaum's seven ways in which a person can be seen and/or treated as an object. If every time I see and/or treat someone (including myself) in one or more of the other six ways on Nussbaum's list, without this treatment denying their (or my) humanity in any way, we called this objectification, then, without doubt, our objectification category would become far too inclusive: it would seem to include nearly all of the ways we ordinarily see

³⁶ Nussbaum, 'Objectification' (1995), p. 251.

and treat each other and ourselves in our daily lives. Since it is reasonable not to want to call ‘everything’ objectification, it seems that we are better off favouring a less inclusive conception than Nussbaum’s.

Interestingly, Nussbaum herself seems to be concerned, at times, about her objectification conception being too inclusive. For example, she states that sometimes we do not treat the occurrence of only one of these notions as sufficient for objectification.³⁷ This statement of Nussbaum’s implies that she does realize the need to put some limit to what should be called ‘objectification’. However, she does not further deal with this matter, and gives us no guidance at all as to how we can decide whether objectification is present when a person is treated in one of the seven ways she mentions. Moreover, Nussbaum herself applies the term ‘objectification’ with ease to a variety of cases throughout her article. Her example of using one’s partner’s stomach as a pillow by placing one’s head on top of it, for instance, involves, according to her, one notion (instrumentality). Nussbaum calls this case ‘objectification’ without at all defending the use of this term.³⁸

So Nussbaum is less concerned than one would like about what exactly counts as objectification. She understands objectification as a multiple concept, including many of the ways we ordinarily see and treat one another, which, in their majority, are morally innocent, positive, or even ‘wonderful’.³⁹ She therefore does not judge it urgent to specify necessary and sufficient conditions for objectification, and often leaves it to people’s individual judgments to decide what will count as objectification.

However, how meaningful is this broad and vague conception of objectification put forward by Nussbaum? Not particularly; it encompasses too much to be useful, and there is great uncertainty as to when to apply this concept. People will apply the concept differently, often relying solely on their intuitions, and there will be much disagreement and confusion as to what really counts as objectification. If we want objectification to be a useful and meaningful concept, we must restrict it.

Furthermore, once this concept’s association with the negative and morally problematic is weakened, and it becomes, as in Nussbaum’s case, something ordinary, widespread, and in many cases a positive and wonderful part of our lives, there is a further risk: the risk that the fight against (negative) objectification is undermined. The plea to end objectification, vividly put forward by

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 250–51.

Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin will no longer sound so urgent and pressing; it might even sound misguided, if objectification is thought to be, in many cases, a positive and valuable part of our lives, something we are not willing to give up. It seems to me that objectification would be a more useful concept if restricted to the negative, as Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin have originally suggested. This way, we can more efficiently focus our efforts on teaching people why it is wrong, how to spot it, as well as how to avoid it (avoid both causing and being the targets of objectification).

The above, we can say, are practical reasons for not adopting Nussbaum's conception of objectification. Besides its impracticality, however, Nussbaum's conception seems to face yet another problem: some of the cases Nussbaum herself describes as ones of objectification do not deserve this name. As already mentioned, Nussbaum defines objectification as treating one thing as another, treating a human being as something that she is not: an object with no humanity.⁴⁰ It does not seem quite right, then, to say that people in Nussbaum's benign/positive objectification cases are treated *as objects*, when their humanity is—as Nussbaum herself admits—acknowledged, respected, and even promoted.

Take the case from *Lady Chatterley*, in which the two lovers occasionally deny each other's autonomy and subjectivity, within the context of a relationship in which their autonomy and subjectivity (and their humanity, more generally) is deeply acknowledged and valued. Is Nussbaum right to suggest that the two partners treat each other *as objects*?

There is something not quite right in Nussbaum's characterization of the two heroes as objectified. We treat objects as not having any autonomy or subjectivity whatsoever. We do not treat objects as lacking in autonomy and subjectivity the one moment, and then go on treating them as autonomous subjects the rest of the time. Furthermore, since objects clearly do not have humanity, we do not at any time acknowledge, respect or try to promote their humanity. Doing so would be absurd, and even problematic.⁴¹

This, however, is exactly what the partners in *Lady Chatterley* do: they overall treat each other as autonomous subjects. Even during those very moments when they deny each other's autonomy and subjectivity, Connie and Mellor never stop acknowledging and respecting each other's humanity (this is, after all, what makes such denial of autonomy and subjectivity unproblematic).

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 256–57; Nussbaum, 'Feminism, Virtue, and Objectification', p. 50.

⁴¹ For interesting discussions of attributing human qualities to objects, treating *objects as people*, see Melinda Vadas, 'The Manufacture-for-use of Pornography and Women's Inequality', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 13.2 (2005) pp. 174–193; Jennifer Saul, 'On Treating Things as People: Objectification, Pornography, and the History of the Vibrator', *Hypatia* 21.2 (2006).

It would not seem quite accurate, therefore, to say that Connie and Mellor treat each other as objects, or that they objectify each other.

Furthermore, there seems to be no need to call the treatment of Connie and Mellor in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley* 'objectification'. We can simply say that the two heroes occasionally deny each other's autonomy and subjectivity. In fact, this seems like the best way to accurately describe the situation. It certainly adds more information than simply resorting to calling such treatment 'objectification', when the term 'objectification' is so broad that it can mean, as we have seen, nearly everything (from seeing a taxi driver as a means to reach my destination, to treating a person as physically violable).

3. Towards a Plausible Understanding of Objectification

Both Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's and Nussbaum's conceptions of objectification are, to some extent at least, problematic. We have reason, therefore, not to want to adopt either of them as they are. However, drawing on these two conceptions, while being aware of the problems each of them faces, can actually direct us towards a more plausible understanding of objectification.

Nussbaum's conception, as we have seen, is far too broad and vague, including most of the ways we ordinarily see and treat each other in our daily lives. Evidently, it is Nussbaum's benign/positive objectification category that causes the problems for her conception. In what Nussbaum describes as 'benign/positive' objectification cases, people's humanity, as we have seen, is not in any way denied, but it is fully acknowledged, respected, and even promoted. Calling all such cases 'objectification' will leave us with an undesirably broad objectification category, and might even impede our efforts to target and fight (negative) objectification. Finally, as argued in the previous section, Nussbaum's benign/positive objectification cases do not even deserve to be called 'objectification'.

This directs us towards the conclusion that we are better off without Nussbaum's benign/positive objectification category. It seems preferable to restrict our conception of objectification to include only the morally problematic cases: those cases in which people's humanity is affected in a negative way. This is what Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin did: they saw objectification as a necessarily negative phenomenon. What Nussbaum calls 'benign/positive objectification' is something Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin simply do not conceive as objectification. In this sense, their account of objectification is an appealing one.

Following Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin, then, we should restrict the term 'objectification' to the morally objectionable. At the same time, however, we have reason not to want to adopt these thinkers' own conception of

objectification, since, as discussed in the second section, it is overly narrow; we do not want to commit ourselves to the claim that objectification necessarily involves harming a person's humanity.

This leads us back to Nussbaum. Nussbaum's category of negative objectification can actually give us what we need at this point: a plausible account of what makes objectification morally problematic. According to Nussbaum, negative objectification is seeing and/or treating a person as an object in a way that involves denying this person's humanity (either in the sense of harming or in the sense of ignoring/not properly acknowledging humanity). What is problematic with objectification, in most cases at least, as Nussbaum rightly suggests, is that it involves ignoring/not fully acknowledging a person's humanity (not harming humanity). What Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin saw as the characteristic feature and the central problem of objectification, then—this serious harm to an individual's humanity—is something that only rarely actually occurs in a case of objectification.

So, following Kant/MacKinnon/Dworkin's instruction that objectification should be understood as a negative phenomenon, and adopting Nussbaum's own view of what it is that makes objectification negative, we can now define objectification as follows:

Objectification is seeing and/or treating a person as an object (seeing and/or treating them in one or more of these seven ways: as an instrument, inert, fungible, violable, owned, denied autonomy, denied subjectivity), in such a way that denies this person's humanity. A person's humanity is denied when it is ignored/not properly acknowledged and/or when it is in some way harmed.

We can, furthermore, proceed to making some distinctions between different forms that objectification can take:

(a) *Reductive–Non-reductive objectification:*

- Objectification is *reductive* when the objectified individual's humanity (her rational capacities) is in some way harmed. When such harm occurs, a person's status as a being with rational capacities is, we can think, diminished or *reduced*.
- Objectification is *non-reductive* when the objectified individual's humanity (her rational capacities) is not in some way harmed, but merely ignored/not fully acknowledged.

(b) *Intentional–Unintentional objectification:*

- Objectification is *intentional* when the objectifier (A) has the intention of denying (either in the sense of harming or in the sense of merely

ignoring/not fully acknowledging) the objectified individual's (B's) humanity, and A does succeed in denying B's humanity.

- Objectification is *unintentional* when the objectifier (A) does not have the intention of denying (either in the sense of harming or in the sense of merely ignoring/not fully acknowledging) the objectified individual's (B's) humanity, yet A denies B's humanity.

Combining (a) and (b), there can be:

(c) *Intentional reductive objectification–Unintentional reductive objectification:*

- *Reductive objectification is intentional* when the objectifier (A) intends to harm the objectified individual's (B's) humanity, and A succeeds in harming B's humanity.
- *Reductive objectification is unintentional* when the objectifier (A) does not intend to harm the objectified individual's (B's) humanity, yet A harms B's humanity.

(d) *Intentional non-reductive objectification–Unintentional non-reductive objectification:*

- *Non-reductive objectification is intentional* when the objectifier (A) intends to deny the objectified individual's (B's) humanity, and A succeeds in denying B's humanity in the sense of ignoring/not properly acknowledging B's humanity.
- *Non-reductive objectification is unintentional* when the objectifier (A) does not intend to deny the objectified individual's (B's) humanity, and yet A denies B's humanity in the sense of ignoring/not properly acknowledging B's humanity.

Since, according to the above conception, objectification can take place even if the objectified individual's humanity is not harmed, but merely ignored/not fully acknowledged (what I have called 'non-reductive objectification'), it seems that we can allow for the possibility of a woman objectifying a man. Even if we want to share MacKinnon and Dworkin's conviction that women in our societies are in a position of relative powerlessness as compared to men, we can still argue that women are capable of objectifying men. Or, to be more precise, that women are capable of objectifying men in some of the ways discussed above. For example, even assuming that women do not have the power required to harm men's humanity, women can still objectify men by ignoring/not fully acknowledging their humanity (non-reductive objectification).

Furthermore, as the distinctions drawn above suggest, objectification can be either intentional or unintentional. This point is hardly ever acknowledged

in discussions of the phenomenon of objectification. Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin have stereotypically presented the objectifier as someone who has the intention of harming another's humanity. The lover's intention, according to Kant, is to 'plunge [the loved one] into the greatest unhappiness'.⁴² Similarly, obvious throughout MacKinnon's and Dworkin's work is the idea that men's intention is to create women-objects for their use and abuse.

A person, however, might not have the intention to objectify another, to deny the latter's humanity, and yet do so. This is often the case with paternalistic behaviour. Imagine a case in which a person treats his friend as completely non-autonomous, say by locking her in a room in order to prevent her from going ice-climbing. His intention of treating her in such a way is not to deny the friend's humanity (that is, he has no intention to harm or not fully acknowledge her humanity); his intention, rather, is to protect her (he knows that her climbing skills are poor and that there is a high risk involved in such an activity). If you ask him why he treated his friend in this way his reply will not be 'To objectify her', but something along the lines of 'I wanted to save her life'. Even though the intention to deny the friend's humanity is absent from such a case, however, it is nonetheless a case of objectification, since denial of humanity has (albeit unintentionally) occurred: the paternalistic friend has not fully acknowledged his friend's rational capacities; he has not respected her humanity.

Other cases involving unintentional objectification are what I will call 'ignorance cases'. Men in patriarchal societies are often brought up with a number of stereotypes about women, and so they come to think that certain kinds of inappropriate attitudes towards women are actually permissible, and even normal or required. For example, imagine a man who was brought up to think that women are too emotional to think rationally. The man in question can easily be led to deny his female partner's subjectivity (her thoughts or opinions) when it comes to a certain matter (matter X). Denying his partner's subjectivity in this way makes this man an objectifier. However, it seems that his intention was not to objectify the woman, to deny her humanity. His intention was, rather, to come to a rational decision concerning matter X (which, according to his upbringing, required ignoring his over-emotional female partner's subjectivity).

Unintentional objectification can even take place in cases involving violence against women. Take a man, for instance, who was brought up to believe that the correct attitude towards women requires sometimes using violence against them. In a particular case, where his female partner, say, disobeys him, the man

⁴² Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, pp. 155-56 (27:384).

in question acts violently against her. This man is clearly an objectifier. However, his intention might not be to objectify the woman, to deny her humanity in any way, but only (as he would put it) to ‘teach her a lesson’.

The stereotype of the objectifier whose intention is to objectify women, to hurt their humanity and reduce them to mere things, introduced by Kant and then adopted by MacKinnon and Dworkin, does not apply to all cases of objectification. Realizing that objectification is often caused by ignorance and is thus unintentional is important in order to correctly fight this phenomenon. We need to do much more than simply blaming men for their objectifying behaviours, and expect them to change. If men are ignorant of their objectifying behaviours, it seems that what we urgently need to do is educate them and explain to them that certain views they have about women (for example, that women are too emotional to think rationally, or that it is permissible to abuse women) are actually deeply problematic. Equally important is also to educate women, since some women too are brought up to believe that certain kinds of objectifying attitudes towards them by men (even violent and abusive ones) are actually normal. Unintentional objectification is more common than it is generally thought, and it is crucial to be able to detect it. What we need, then, is a conception of objectification that allows us to distinguish between intentional and unintentional cases of objectification: cases of objectification where, even though there is no intention on the part of the objectifier to deny the objectified individual’s humanity, he nonetheless treats the latter in ways so as to bring about this denial of humanity.

According to the conception of objectification suggested above, a necessary and sufficient condition for objectification is *denying a person’s humanity* in treating them as an object (in one or more of the seven ways Nussbaum mentions on her list). But how can we tell whether denial of humanity takes place when a person is treated as an object? This is, undeniably, a difficult question. While we can quite confidently say that a person’s humanity has been denied when it has been harmed in some way (that is, in cases of reductive objectification, such as the case of *Isabelle and Veronique*), it is far from an easy task to tell whether a person’s humanity has been denied or not in cases where this harm to humanity is absent. That is, it is not always easy to tell whether an individual’s humanity has been properly respected or not, when they are treated in one or more of the seven ways Nussbaum mentions.

Nussbaum instructs us to look at the overall context of the relationship in which a person is treated as an object in order to decide whether or not denial of humanity has occurred. She writes: ‘In the matter of objectification context is everything. . . in many if not all cases, the difference between an objectionable and a benign use of objectification will be made by the overall context of the

human relationship'.⁴³ Since we have rejected Nussbaum's distinction between benign and negative objectification, her instruction can be adapted as follows to fit our conception of objectification (which is always negative): 'in many if not all cases, the difference between the occurrence or not of objectification will be made by the overall context of the human relationship'.

But what, more specifically, should we be looking for within a relationship in order to decide whether humanity is respected or not? Turning to the example from *Lady Chatterley*, which is for Nussbaum a clear case in which humanity is deeply respected and promoted, we notice that the two lovers' relationship is characterized by equality and mutuality. Nussbaum writes: 'objectification [within this example] is symmetrical and mutual and...undertaken in a context of rough social equality'.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it is characterized by 'enormous trust, trust that might be thought to be impossible in a relationship that did not include at least some sort of mutual respect and concern'.⁴⁵ Within this context of equality, mutuality, respect and trust, the two parties treat each other as ends in themselves: they value and promote their humanity. Autonomy-denial, subjectivity-denial and instrumentalization, then, which occur during sex, do not threaten the two parties' humanity. Within this overall safe context the two partners' humanity is not in any way denied.

This ideal of equality and reciprocity, which is present in the example from *Lady Chatterley*, makes it the case that denial of humanity does not occur when people are treated in one or more of the seven ways on Nussbaum's list. Within less morally safe contexts, however, it will be hard to judge when the occurrence of one or more of Nussbaum's notions involves or not denying a person's humanity. Admittedly, judging the overall context of a relationship and how this affects people's humanity is far from an easy task. And since, as Nussbaum herself implies, we will be relying largely (if not exclusively) on our intuitions in order to make such judgements, we must be prepared to expect much disagreement. However, for the moment at least, this is the way to proceed. At the same time, we should continue our investigations of the phenomenon of objectification, the notions involved in it, as well as the various contexts in which it occurs, with the hope that more aspects of this phenomenon will become clearer to us in the future.

⁴³ Nussbaum, 'Objectification' (1995), p. 271.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

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