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Sexual objectification

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Sexual objectification, in the broadest terms, involves (at least) treating people as things. Philosophers have offered different accounts of what, more precisely, this involves. According to the conjoint view of Catherine Mackinnon and Sally Haslanger, sexual objectification is necessarily morally objectionable. According to Martha Nussbaum, it is not: there can be benign instances of it, in the course of a healthy sexual relationship, for instance. This is taken to be a serious disagreement, both by Nussbaum and by recent commentators such as Lina Papadaki. However it isn't a serious disagreement, for the two theories have different aims and methodology, and are not rivals. They both could be apt, simultaneously.

1. MacKinnon-Haslanger account

I treat this as a single account, since Haslanger is strongly influenced by MacKinnon, offering a systematized version of her view with certain additions. Haslanger writes, reconstructing MacKinnon:

If one objectifies something (or someone), one views it and treats it as an object for the satisfaction of one's desire; but this is not all, for objectification is assumed to be a relation of domination where one also has the power to enforce one's view. Objectification 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 one also has the power to make it have the properties one desires it to have. A good objectifier will, when the need arises—that is, when the object lacks the desired properties—exercise his power to make the object have the properties he desires (2012: 64-65).

In the background is a theory of gender as constituted by hierarchical social relations: men are, constitutionally, objectifiers, and women are, constitutionally, objectified (MacKinnon 1987; Haslanger 2012: 56). Prominent features of the view are, as indicated, that: a) objectification involves both seeing and treating another person as mere means to one's own ends; b) it is an attitude backed up by the power to enforce. What makes objectification *sexual* is, first, that it involves subordination to men's sexual interests; and that it is eroticized: that woman are to be sexually subordinated is experienced as what is erotic about women, both by men and by women too (MacKinnon 1987: 54).

A further feature of the view, developed by Haslanger, is that objectification involves epistemic as well as moral harm: it involves falsely believing the objectified to have a nature which 'makes it desirable in the ways one desires,

and which enables it to satisfy that desire' (2012: 66). Objectified people are seen as naturally suited to satisfying the desires that their objectifiers have towards them.

In short, on this view:

'To be sexually objectified means having a social meaning imposed on your being that defines you as to be sexually used, according to your desired uses, and then using you that way' (MacKinnon 1989: 327)

2. Nussbaum-Langton account

Nussbaum treats 'sexual objectification' as

'...a relatively loose cluster-term, for whose application we sometimes treat any one of these features as sufficient, though more often a plurality of features is present when the term is applied'. (1995: 258)

The relevant features she identifies as follows (1995: 275). An objectifier perceives *or* treats the objectified as some or all of the following: as an instrument; as lacking in autonomy; as inert or lacking in agency; as fungible; as violable; as capable of being owned; as lacking in subjectivity and whose experiences and feelings, if any, are irrelevant. To this list Rae Langton (2009: 228-230), building on Nussbaum's theory, proposes to add: as reduced to its body, or body parts; as reduced to appearances; as silent and lacking the capacity

to speak. Because of these non-destructive additions, I'm referring to the conjoined version of these views as the Nussbaum-Langton account.

Unlike MacKinnon-Haslanger, the Nussbaum-Langton account does not make sexual objectification constitutively tied to gender roles: one of Nussbaum's examples is of a man objectifying another man (1995: 253). Objectification can be a way of perceiving people, as well as or instead of treating them a certain way: this is both explicit in Nussbaum's formulation, and in Langton's additions.

For this reason, it does not necessarily involve any force or threat of force.

Relatedly, it isn't necessarily harmful - or more strictly speaking, not all forms of objectification are necessarily harmful. Consensual instrumentalisation of

another person—e.g. by using them as a 'pillow' to lean on - can be fine

(Nussbaum 1995: 265); moreover, even where there is a temporary 'surrender of autonomy' in sex, resulting in being objectified, this is permissible so long as

generally, the 'context is... one in which, on the whole, autonomy is respected and promoted' (1995: 275). In discussion, Langton introduces further

distinctions in what one may 'do' to autonomy in the course of objectification:

one may be 'failing to attribute it, violating it, surrendering it, demanding that

another surrender it, destroying it, stifling it' (2009: 236-7), with consequences

for whether the objectification in question counts as morally harmful or not.

Finally, sexual objectification apparently counts as *sexual* because it occurs in the context of a sexual relationship, though need not involve sexual behaviour (as in leaning on a lover's stomach for a pillow).

3. No real dispute here

Is sexual objectification necessarily morally harmful, or not? Nussbaum argues that it is not, since there can (on her view) be benign instances of it, and criticizes MacKinnon's view for being 'insufficiently sensitive' to such 'human complexities' (1995: 273). Papadaki (2010) takes Nussbaum to be at odds with MacKinnon on the question of whether objectification is necessarily harmful, and criticizes both in favour of her own view. Equally, one might take there to be substantive disagreements between MacKinnon-Nussbaum and Haslanger-Langton on: whether objectification is essentially epistemically harmful; whether it is essentially tied to gender relations; whether it can involve merely perceiving a person in a particular way, or must involve action; or why exactly it counts as sexual. Yet the appearance of all such disagreements is illusory. For the two theories are engaged in different projects and are not in competition.

There are various things one might be doing, in offering a theory of objectification. On the one hand, one might be offering an account of *objectification* (italicized to denote concern with the concept), as it's employed in ordinary usage. Nussbaum-Langton is doing this (1995:252). It's for this reason a cluster account is offered: it would be optimistic to think ordinary users applied the concept in a way which revealed some underlying tight set of necessary and sufficient conditions. It's also for this reason that *objectification* is characterized so broadly. This presumably reflects the fact that, unless the concept is a technically introduced one for some strict purpose, ordinary usage of a concept tends to range in an increasingly widespread way over contexts, as morals and preferences or habits of use change or expand.

MacKinnon-Haslanger is engaged in a different project. Its aim, I take it, can be summarised in the following story, simplified to its essentials. The authors think they have noticed some morally problematic activity in the world: the forced treatment of a certain group of people for the sexual ends and interests of another group of people, in a way which harms that group. Having noticed it, they want to name it, and to explain its origin in a particular social context, its relationship to gender and sexuality, and consequences. The name they have for this activity is “sexual objectification”; they introduce this term quasi-stipulatively to refer to the phenomenon they have noticed.

This interpretation allows us to understand features of their view relatively undramatically. The behaviour they name gets to count as ‘necessarily morally problematic’ because the phenomenon they wish to name comes *already identified* in moral terms, in that this is how it presents itself and is identified as such; it involves “domination”, “force”, “using others as mere means”, and other terms indicative of autonomy-violation. Similarly, the behaviour they name picks out a phenomenon essentially epistemically harmful/ tied to gender/ eroticized, etc. because this is a feature of the behaviour they want to name as such.

To sum up: for Nussbaum-Langton, there is non-harmful sexual objectification, because the folk identify certain activities as *objectification* which are not picked out in essentially moral terms, and so are not always harmful, though they may frequently be contingently so. MacKinnon-Langton does not allow non-harmful sexual objectification because that was not what the authors intended to name by the appellation of “sexual objectification”, and they are relatively uninterested

in how the folk may refer to things. Their use of the same term as Nussbaum-Langton does not imply they intend to use this name in a way that reflects the way it has historically been used or is used by others. Of course, their usage of 'sexual objectification' as a term is apt, inasmuch as what they refer to can be recognised as a way of treating people as objects. But they apparently have no pretensions towards uncovering or even 'cleaning up' existing usage, nor in being exhaustive. If this is the right way to look at things, then MacKinnon-Haslanger isn't in competition with Nussbaum-Langton, since the theoretical aims are different. The criterion of success of Nussbaum-Langton is whether it captures all the significant contexts in which the concept is ordinarily applied. The criterion of success for MacKinnon-Haslanger is whether it offers explanatory value: a useful way of grouping observed phenomena in the world, at least partly with a view to effective moral criticism.

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Abstract

Sexual objectification, in the broadest terms, involves (at least) treating people as things. Philosophers have offered different accounts of what, more precisely, this involves. According to the conjoint view of Catherine Mackinnon and Sally Haslanger, sexual objectification is necessarily morally objectionable. According to Martha Nussbaum, it is not: there can be benign instances of it, in the course of a healthy sexual relationship, for instance. This is taken to be a serious disagreement, both by Nussbaum and by recent commentators such as Lina Papadaki. However it isn't a serious disagreement, for the two theories have

different aims and methodology, and are not rivals. They both could be apt, simultaneously¹.

¹ The material here is drawn from talks given at the 2014 Evaluative Perception conference, University of Glasgow; the Philosophy Departments of UC Irvine, the Open University and Manchester; and the British Society of Aesthetics Cambridge Lecture Series. Thanks to audiences for their helpful questions and comments. For a positive theory of objectification, see Stock (MS, forthcoming).