Objectification

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Objectification (revised)
ABSTRACT

I consider answers to the question 'What is objectification?'. After preliminary remarks about different methodological approaches, I introduce several possible answers, or groups of answers, separated out in terms of broad themes. I situate each in relation to historical and more contemporary authors. These themes are: objectification as instrumentalisation; objectification as reduction to body; objectification as negation of subjectivity or agency; objectification as naturalisation. I discuss the fact that objectification can function in relation to both sexual and racial contexts. I finish by discussing these themes in relation to the wider category of 'mind-suppression', and its relation to objectification in the familiar context of imagery.
At a first pass, objectification involves treating a person as one might treat an object. But what does it mean to do this, more concretely? As might be expected, several different senses have been identified. I’ll enumerate them, making some observations about how they interrelate. But first I’ll say a bit about different methodological approaches to the question.

**Methodology**

Martha Nussbaum (1995) proposes a cluster account. She lists seven ways of seeing or treating someone, importantly close to ways one might treat an object. She suggests that sometimes, just one of these is sufficient for objectification, though more often several are required. To this list, Rae Langton (2009) adds three more activities plus several different possible understandings of certain members of Nussbaum’s original list. As we will see, some of these additions move beyond ways one might treat an object, covering attitudes and behaviours one could plausibly extend only to a human being.

In a different approach, the focus is on a single form of objectification, taken to be especially significant. This is the approach that, for instance, Sandra Bartky (1990) and Sally Haslanger (2012) each adopt. I assume that their doing so isn’t supposed to rule out there being other forms of objectification equally worthy of analysis.

To generalise from these examples: in analysing objectification, one might try to provide a comprehensive survey of its forms or focus on only one. One might stick only to attitudes plausibly extended to objects or one might move beyond this. Whatever the approach, the aim of an account of objectification is normally that of uncovering a conceptual tool with which to engage in moral critique of inappropriate or harmful ways of seeing or acting.

A further potential source of methodological divergence, as we’ll see, is whether the aim of a given account is to provide a morally neutral account of objectification, and then to explain the harms associated with objectification as
due to contingent accompanying factors; or to define objectification in such a way that harm gets built in *a priori*. For instance, Nussbaum and Bartky allow for objectification which is non-harmful; Haslanger does not.

This difference mirrors a similar divergence in related discussions of pornography (PORNOGRAPHY AND OBSCENITY), where some authors (e.g. MacKinnon 1987) define pornography stipulatively as involving harm - including the harm of objectification - whereas others define it more neutrally. More generally, discussions of pornography often tend to include discussions of objectification, and vice versa, since it is reasonably assumed that pornography is at least contingently a prime site of harmful sexual objectification. Arguably this emphasis can sometimes obscure strongly objectifying influences exerted by non-pornographic cultural tendencies upon women. In any case, to keep discussion manageable, I shall focus on objectification extrapolated from a pornographic context.

A final methodological difference concerns whether the aim is to uncover sexual objectification, specifically, or objectification in a more general sense which potentially covers racial objectification too. Some of the accounts I’ll look at below can be extended in modified form to cover racial as well as sexual objectification.

In the following survey, I can’t hope to cover in detail all the many different strands identified by philosophers as relevant to objectification as a practice. I’m also unable to trace links to other related concepts of critique in this area, such as *dehumanization*. My aim is more modest: to pick out some dominant themes and discussion points.

**Objectification as instrumentalisation**

One way in which we treat objects is to use them for various purposes; and so one way we might ‘objectify’ a person is by using them for some purpose. However, invoking a distinction famously made by Immanuel Kant (*see IMMANUEL KANT*), there’s a difference between using - if it can even be called
that – a person with their actual or presumed consent, and using them in a way to which they don’t or couldn’t consent (see KANTIAN PRACTICAL ETHICS). Only the latter looks like a form of objectification, since it effectively treats the used person’s capacity for autonomy as morally irrelevant (see AUTONOMY).

Famously, one of Kant’s formulations of the moral law, known as the ‘Humanity Formulation’, is as follows:

> Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end. (1964 [1785]: 32-33)

Kant assumes that an action towards a particular person equally implies, at the same time, some attitude towards ‘humanity’, understood specifically as that capacity for rational autonomous choice which is for Kant the source of both morality and freedom. In morally permissible action towards a particular individual, you may treat that person, and so humanity more generally, as a means to an end as long as you are simultaneously treating humanity as an end in itself. In impermissible action, in contrast, you are treating humanity ‘simply as a means’ (see INSTRUMENTAL VALUE).

What is it to treat humanity, via one’s actions towards a particular person, ‘simply as a means’? Many commentators agree that it involves treating that person’s autonomy as irrelevant. On one interpretation, it is to treat a person as a means to a given end, where that person cannot share the end in question, because she is prevented from deliberately choosing it (Korsgaard 1996: 139). On another, it is to treat a person in a manner to which they can’t consent (O’Neill 1989: 172). On a third account, it is a hybrid of these sorts of approaches (Kerstein 2009).

Sometimes, the morally permissible version of ‘using’ another person, where both parties share the same end or are consenting, is nonetheless treated as a kind of objectification. See for instance Nussbaum, who includes, within her
account, a person treating someone else ‘as a tool of his or her purposes’ (1995:257), and includes within this, benign consensual uses such as using one’s lover’s stomach ‘as a pillow’ (1995: 265). Yet if we are interested in facilitating moral critique it doesn’t seem particularly useful to count the consensual version of ‘using someone’ as a form of objectification, unless some other accompanying harm can also be identified (Papadaki 2010: 31) In contrast, where no consent is sought or given, this seems a morally relevant fact in the treatment of a person, and one worthy of drawing attention to.

Various characterisations of harmful objectification identified by Nussbaum can be traced to this Kantian notion of instrumentalisation. For instance, objectification construed as the ‘violability’ of a person, or as ‘ownership’ of them (1995: 257) both look grounded in non-consensual instrumentalisation. Meanwhile, Langton (2009) offers a corrective to Nussbaum’s apparent assumption that the relation between harmful objectification and a person’s autonomy can only involve a negative attitude (i.e. denying it or treating it as irrelevant). Langton argues that various forms of harmful objectification involve, apparently perversely, affirming a person’s capacity for autonomy during one’s instrumental use of them. One may be deliberately violating someone’s autonomy, or ‘demanding that another surrender it’ (2009: 237), for instance. Each of these requires prior recognition of autonomy. (This being so, though these may count as forms of objectification in an extended sense, strictly speaking they aren’t ways in which one might interact with an object.)

Catharine MacKinnon (1987) also offers an iteration of the instrumentalisation account of objectification, allying it with a theory of gender (see FEMINIST ETHICS). On this view, what it is to be a man is, constitutionally, to be an objectifier in a particular sense; and what it is to be a women is, constitutionally, to be objectified (MacKinnon 1987; Haslanger 2012: 57-63). The focus is a kind of sexual objectification, where ‘sexual’ is also understood in a particular way. MacKinnon’s account construes sexual objectification as, not just the instrumental treating of another person – or in this case, women generally – simply as a means an end; but also as involving the eroticising of that
instrumental relationship, for both the objectified and the objectified (1987: 53-4). It is this that makes the objectification sexual. She adds that in sexual objectification, the instrumental use of women tends to be enforced through violence (1987: 51).

Objectification as reduction to the body
Another dominant theme in discussion of objectification is the reduction of a person to a body, or to a set of bodily appearances. Again, there is a connection here to Kant. In his Lectures on Ethics he talks of sexual activity with another person, outside of marriage, thus:

[E]ach of them dishonours the human nature of the other. They make of humanity an instrument for the satisfaction of their lusts and inclinations (1963 [1775-1780]: 64).

At first glance, this implies that sexual intercourse outside of marriage must, as just discussed, involve instrumentally using the other simply as a means in a way that violates their autonomy (see SEXUAL MORALITY). On further inspection, however, it is hard to see how Kant could justify this demanding stance simply in virtue of the Humanity Formulation; for obviously, people engaged in sex outside of marriage usually both share an end - the end of having sex - and freely consent to that end.

To understand the stance better, we need to add other parts of Kant’s view: for instance, that inclinations, including sexual appetites, are not freely chosen. But there is another important strain present in his discussion. This is the thought that in relating to someone sexually, one is ceasing to relate to them as a human being (i.e., in Kant’s terms, as a rational autonomous chooser). Instead, one is interested in them only as a sexed body. One is using a ‘person’s sexual organs for the satisfaction of sexual desire’ (1963[1775-80]: 168):

The desire which a man has for a woman is not directed towards her because she is a human being, but because she is a woman; that she is a
human being is of no concern to the man; only her sex is the object of his desires. Human nature is thus subordinated (Kant 1963[1775-80]: 163)

Relatedly, Sandra Bartky writes that

‘A person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her’. (1990: 26; see also Langton 2009: 228-230).

As Kant suggests, this kind of objectification is a possible way of relating to someone to whom one is sexually attracted. However, extending the thought away from its original formulation in Kant, it might equally be a way of relating to someone whose body one finds aesthetically pleasing rather than sexually exciting. Indeed, connecting to another aspect of Kant’s system, on some loosely Kantian ‘formalist’ accounts of aesthetic appreciation (for instance, that of Bell 1916), aesthetic appreciation is grounded in pleasure at sensuous forms of objects, detached from cognitive appraisal or categorisation. On this view, then, it seems that one might aesthetically appreciate someone’s body or face exclusively in terms of shapes, planes, and textures, without simultaneously considering their owner in terms of any other dimension. Indeed, this kind of stance, presumably minus the pleasure, might equally be a way of relating to someone whose body one finds repulsive.

Another understanding of objectification - as ‘fungibility’ or treating a person as ‘interchangeable with other objects of the same type’ (Nussbaum 1995: 257) – looks related to this reduction to bodily appearances, either sexual or aesthetic. If your only interest in a person is as the bearer of a certain bodily appearance, then they will be functionally interchangeable for you with anyone else who might share that appearance.

As Bartky points out, divorced from Kant’s ethical programme, objectification in the sense of reduction to bodily appearances need not inevitably be harmful:
Surely there are times... when a woman might want to be regarded as nothing but a sexually intoxicating body and when attention paid to some other aspect of her person – say, to her mathematical ability – would be absurd and out of place.' (1990: 26)

Equally, a doctor might perfectly appropriately perceive and treat a patient as a body, primarily, in the context of certain diseases or injuries. According to Bartky, harm accrues, rather, when objectification of this kind becomes habitually extended to a person across a range of contexts, so that attention is frequently removed from aspects of their mind, personality, character, aptitudes, and so on, in favour of attention to relatively surface forms.

It seems to be an empirical fact that this sort of attention is habitually extended to women as a sex class, both by men and other women. Many cultures encourage its members to relate to women primarily as bodies to be sexually or aesthetically appraised. A wealth of social psychological literature attests to the harms caused for those objectified in this way (Szymanski et al, 2010). Among other things, as Jean-Paul Sartre (see JEAN-PAUL SARTRE) notes, there is a reduction in cognitive possibilities for the objectified person. Being aware of being looked at makes one aware of one’s status as object for the other who looks, and so induces a reduction in perceptual possibilities for oneself:

We cannot perceive the world and at the same time apprehend a look fastened upon us; it must be either one or the other. This is because to perceive is to look at, and to apprehend a look is not to apprehend a look-as-object in the world (unless the look is not directed upon us); it is to be conscious of being looked at. (Sartre 2003 [1943], 259)

It is also possible to habitually extend this sort of reductive attention to one’s own body. This falls into the category of ‘self-objectification’, understood here as seeing or relating to oneself, principally, as a body, or set of bodily appearances
Unsurprisingly, given the cultural pressures just noted, a body of psychological literature suggests that this phenomenon is again particularly prevalent in, and harmful to women. It is associated with feelings of shame, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and – as perhaps anticipated by Sartre - frequent distracting self-monitoring (Calogero et al, 2011).

Objectification as negation of subjectivity or agency
A further important sense of objectification involves, as Nussbaum, has it, the 'denial of subjectivity': treating someone as 'something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account' (1995: 257). To this, we can suggestively connect two other, related forms of objectification: treating as inert or 'lacking in agency' (Nussbaum 1995: 257) and treating as 'silent and lacking the capacity to speak' (Langton 2009: 228-9). Both look traceable, potentially, to a prior failure to attribute subjectivity. This aspect of objectification is fruitfully explored through a connection with feminist existentialism.

As already intimated, central to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is the notion of 'The Look' (*see* EXISTENTIALISM; JEAN-PAUL SARTRE). Sartre stresses that for a person to look at another person, in the ordinary way, is *not* simply to relate to them as an object, as one would, say, look at a 'puppet' (2003 [1943] 278). Rather, it involves seeing the Other as a self-conscious subject in their own right, with their own agency, perspective, values and projects. Equally, it is to see the Other as someone who potentially can see *me*. In grasping the subjectivity of the Other, I grasp my own objecthood for him, and vice versa:

> It is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject (2003 [1943] 280).

For Sartre, objectification, in this complex sense, is an important route to self-consciousness and self-knowledge (Morris 1999: 74-75).
Along the way, Sartre also notes that to be looked at by the Other, is also, potentially, to be judged in a way one can’t control:

To be looked at is to apprehend oneself as the unknown object of unknowable appraisals-in particular, of value judgments. A judgment is the transcendental act of a free being. Thus being-seen constitutes me as a defenseless being for a freedom which is not my freedom. It is in this sense that we can consider ourselves as "slaves" in so far as we appear to the Other.’ (2003 [1943] 291)

Famously, in *The Second Sex* Simone De Beauvoir (see SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR) puts a particular spin on these themes, by exploring how such dynamics play out for women and girls, in their lived experience in a male-dominated world. Women are forced into a social role where their position as object, to be looked at and judged by others, is emphasised at the expense of consideration of them as seats of subjective perception and judgement in their own right. She writes of woman that:

[S]he discovers and choose herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman’s drama lies in this conflict.. (2011 [1949]: 17)

De Beauvoir traces this drama throughout the book. She describes how women’s tendencies to sexual and social passivity, timidity, masochism, and other ‘feminine’ traits minimising any impression of agency are acquired responses to this positioning, by a patriarchal society, of her as an objectified Other, whose essence is as if frozen, and whose subjectivity is denied. Yet since, of course, a woman remains a human being with subjectivity and agency, even her attempts to voluntarily embrace what patriarchy tries to force upon her, and so to make herself into an object for males in this way (that is, to self-objectify) will be unsatisfactory:
Man even requires her to play act: he wants her to be the *Other*; but every existent, as desperately as he may disavow himself, remains a subject; he wants her to be object: she *makes* herself object; at the moment she makes herself being, she is exercising a free activity; this is her original treason; the most docile, the most passive woman is still consciousness and it is sometimes enough to make him feel duped by her (2011 [1949]: 653; see also Bauer 2105: 52 *et passim*).

The flight into attempted objecthood is fruitless and ultimately self-defeating.

**Objectification as naturalisation**

An accompanying theme in *The Second Sex* is the tendency of patriarchal societies to associate ‘woman’ with ‘Nature’. Either she is some intermediary being, closer to Nature than man but not yet wholly natural; or she is ‘the temptation of Nature, untamed against all reason’ (213) (*see NATURE AND THE NATURAL*). This too is a kind of objectification, connected, once again, to a denial of woman’s agency, though not this time in the context of instrumentalisation *per se*. Women, as a class, are perceived and treated as (if) lacking agency because they are thought of as part of the natural world, as plants and rocks are: as acted upon blindly by natural forces, rather than as sources of action. In this, they are contrasted with men. Of course, the reality is that both women and men are equally subject to natural forces; but still, women are treated as specially affected and driven by them, in a way that men are not. Their biology, and in particular their reproductive capacities, are thought to determine their mental possibilities.

A related device, used especially in literature, is to frame women as animals, and so less than fully human: again, as subject only to natural forces and base instincts (De Beauvoir (2011 [1949]: 653). See for instance Tolstoy in *War and Peace*:}
All at once the angry squirrel-like expression on the princess's pretty little face changed to a moving and piteous look of fear. Her beautiful eyes gave a sidelong glance at her husband and her face assumed the timid, deprecating expression of a dog when it rapidly but feebly wags its drooping tail. (1978: 30).

Objectification-as-naturalisation and objectification-as-instrumentalisation are combined in the views of Sally Haslanger, elaborating upon earlier work of MacKinnon as described in a previous section (see Morris 1999: 68). Haslanger argues that the forced and eroticised instrumentalisation of women by men, which is identified by MacKinnon as objectifying, is treated by many as a natural fact about women. Women are treated as if having 'a nature which makes them... submissive' (2012: 66).

Sexual versus racial objectification

The most common context, linguistically, in which we hear of objectification is with the prefix 'sexual'. This masks an ambiguity about what counts as 'sexual'. On some accounts, a form of objectification might be 'sexual' simply because it is directed towards women (or, more unusually, towards men) on the basis of their membership of a sex class. On others, objectification might be 'sexual' because it's a form of sexual activity, or at least, sexually motivated.

Most of the forms of objectification mentioned above look detachable from both of those contexts. As long as one's reasons are neither sex-related nor sex-class-related, one can objectify someone without it being sexual. We can see this by noting that there is clearly such a thing as racial objectification: treating someone as a mere means, reducing them to a body, treating them as interchangeable with others, negating their subjectivity or agency, treating them as part of the natural world, or, more generally, suppressing aspects of their individual mind - in each case carried out on the basis of their belonging to a given race (see RACISM). In some cases, racial objectification and sexual objectification in the sense of objectification connected to sexuality, can intersect: for instance, when black men are sexually objectified by being treated,
in Franz Fanon’s words (see FRANZ FANON), as ‘fixated at the genital’ (2008 [1967]: 127), in virtue of their race (see also Fanon 2008 [1967]: 136).

Objectification as mind-suppression
As briefly mentioned in the ‘Methodology’ section above, some of the forms of objectification I have canvassed go beyond typical ways of treating objects. One is bound to use an object ‘simply as a means’, since it cannot give consent and has no capacity for autonomy to acknowledge. Depending on circumstance, one might well attend to an object only as a collection of interchangeable appearances or forms. But, in contrast, one cannot actively violate the autonomy of an object, nor eroticise its submission; nor can one negate its subjectivity, or treat its capacity for submission as part of its nature. These activities presuppose the presence of a conscious agency which, by definition, it does not have.

Still, there seems a route available, via which we can unify most of these forms of objectification into a meaningful category, albeit one that has a less direct connection with actual objecthood. Namely, we can usefully categorise them as involving various degrees of ‘mind-suppression’ (Stock 2018). If we think of a paradigmatic human mind as an autonomous entity, free in its thoughts (at least, to the extent that any mind can be free in a deterministic world), fully capable of subjectivity, and with distinctive characteristics, abilities, and traits which give it individuality; then nearly all of the forms of objectification canvassed so far seem to treat an objectified person’s mind as less than this, to a greater or lesser extent. Whenever one’s capacity for rational choice is ignored, or is violated by force; whenever one is treated only as a set of bodily appearances, or as exchangeable with some other person or thing; whenever one’s agency or subjectivity is negated; whenever one is treated as driven by blind natural forces in a way that others supposedly are not; in each case, some aspect of one’s distinctive human mind is being suppressed, to some extent. This is not to say that in each case, the mind is ignored completely: for some kinds of objectification, it’s important that a conscious, subjective, autonomous mind be there, the better to negate it, violate it, or force it into submission, for instance. In
these cases, attention to the mind is only reduced in some way – e.g. by treating
some aspect of it as morally insignificant - rather than wholly suppressed.

This model won't work for all cases of objectification, and it would be demanding
to expect it to, but it seems to identify a strand common to many cases.
Analysing things this way also allows us to make a connection with a familiar
location of objectification: imagery. We are often told that advertisements and
other media images are ‘objectifying’. Insofar as images are ‘mind-suppressing’ –
that is, encouraging viewers to see their human subjects as less than fully
‘minded’, whether by representing them as collections of body parts to be stared
at, or as interchangeable duplicates, or in rarer cases, as animals– we have a
common explanation for the images’ objectifying nature (Stock 2018). Mind-
suppressing imagery is a particularly common way of representing females, and
it seems possible that repeatedly viewing such images infects, not only ways of
behaving towards females, but also ways of seeing them, ultimately causing
harm. Arguably, unconsciously taking a cue from exposure to mind-suppressing
imagery, viewers go on to objectify females (and any other groups objectified by
imagery in this way) by seeing them in a way that is ‘mind-insensitive’ (ibid.).

SEE ALSO:
AUTONOMY;
EXISTENTIALISM;
FEMINIST ETHICS;
FRANZ FANON;
IMMANUEL KANT;
INSTRUMENTAL VALUE;
KANTIAN PRACTICAL ETHICS;
NATURE AND THE NATURAL;
PORNOGRAPHY AND OBSCENITY;
RACISM;
SARTRE, JEAN-PAUL;
SEXUAL MORALITY;
SIMONE DE BEAUVIOR;
References


**Suggested readings**


