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Mere and Partial Means: The Full Range of the Objectification of Women

Carolyn McLeod

Kant discussed the moral wrong of treating people as *mere* means or as a means *only*.¹ To treat people as means is to treat them as objects for our use. It is to objectify them. To treat people as a mere means is to treat them wholly as objects, rather than partially so. It is to have an objectifying manner that is absolute or unmitigated. Whether Kant meant to suggest that we commit a moral wrong only when we treat people as means absolutely, rather than partially, is debatable.² My concern is with how feminist theorists writing on the objectification of women have followed Kant in emphasizing the extreme case of the mere means. These feminists have implied that the moral wrong of objectification occurs only with absolute objectification, as though between it and respecting someone's autonomy, there were no degrees of objectification that are morally suspect.

The relevant feminist work centres on such topics as women's reproductive freedom, their sexual freedom, and gender equity in employment. In discussing women's objectification in reproductive health, feminists often depict women either as "breeders" or as choosing beings; they are either the "mere maternal environment" or conscious moral agents. In illustrating women's sexual objectification, feminists tend to use such stark examples as the Playboy Bunny or the rape victim. A central case in Sandra Lee Bartky's work on objectification is that of a woman interviewed for a philosophy job who had the chair stare at her breasts throughout the entire interview. Bartky writes, "In this situation, the woman is a bosom, not a job candidate."³ She is *mere* bosom.

But what about the woman who is both bosom and job candidate? Are there not gradations of the objectification of women? And what do we miss by assuming there are not? Perhaps there is no such thing as objectifying people to degrees; objectification involves seeing another *as an object*, not as part-object, part-person. Perhaps what I am calling degrees of objectification are simply

instances of treating persons without the full respect they deserve. Such treatment is disrespectful, but not objectifying.

I shall answer objections of that sort while defending the claims that objectification admits of degrees and that a significant portion of the objectification of women in contemporary Western society—objectification that contributes to their oppression—is what I call “partial objectification.” To acknowledge the full range of objectification in women’s lives, feminists need a theory of how objectification can be degreed. They need to be able to say that women can be both bosom and legitimate job candidate, both breeder and health care patient, both sex object and intimate partner.

I. PRELIMINARY COMMENTS ON OBJECTIFICATION

Objectification as a concept is exceedingly complex. Drawing on previous feminist work as well as a narrative of my own experience, I begin by sketching dimensions of objectification insofar as they are relevant to my thesis. Later, I use an analysis of objectification by Martha Nussbaum⁴ as the building blocks for my theory that objectification comes in degrees.

Let me begin with the narrative. When I was a teenager, I was in a tennis tournament in a small town where the McLeods of my family first settled in Ontario. I was in the finals of “ladies singles.” The next day, a picture of me appeared in the sports section of the local newspaper. I was lunging for a ball, and like a good “lady” of tennis, I was wearing a little skirt. Clearly the photographer had taken the shot while lying on his back, for the most prominent feature of it was my crotch. (It became known in town as “the crotch shot.”) My Aunt Fern fumed (my mother laughed), and Fern almost boiled over when she found out that some men at a nearby hydro plant (what we call “Hydro”) put the picture on the wall in the men’s change room.⁵ The whole thing was discomforting for me, especially becoming a target for the sexist jokes and fantasies of men at Hydro. (I’d worked at Hydro, so I knew about the jokes.) Never before had I imagined myself so thoroughly as something that could just get men off. I was angry with the photographer, although I

later found out that it was a photographer's trick to point a camera upward if you want only one figure in a shot and no background objects to distract attention from it. It is possible that the photographer did not intend to produce a crotch shot.

I want to highlight features of this story that will help to illuminate the concept of objectification. First, notice that the men at Hydro who put up my picture essentially reduced me to one of my sexual parts. It may be that *my* crotch was particularly appealing to them because it was part of what was then a pretty athletic body; nonetheless, they wanted a crotch. They treated me as if a part of me could represent me, which is one element of objectification.⁶ It alone does not define objectification (which is something that Bartky assumes), for it is not unique to it, and in fact, appears in one form of "subjectification." Consider how we sometimes identify people by special or quirky aspects of them (e.g., their laugh, their expressions, their way of walking, even their bodily parts), which is something we do most often in close personal relationships. We do not necessarily objectify them, particularly if, for us, the part is a consummate expression of them as subjects.⁷ We allow the part to represent the whole, but in a way that is *subjectifying*, not objectifying. To give an example with which everyone could identify would be difficult. One that works for me is how my friend Sue's beautiful sigh represents her in all of her particularity. It fully captures her disillusionment with mainstream society and the distinct way she expresses that. It also reveals, among other things, the side of her that is playful, because an air of laughter comes out in the sigh.

Second, for the men at Hydro, the part that represented me was not one that defined me as a subject in relation to them. (I did not even know these men; my crotch could not have been the consummate expression of my subjectivity for them.) Hence, they made me out to be an object. Another feature of objectification, the most important no doubt, is that parts of the subject are represented in such a way that she becomes an object or like an object. Objectification in general involves treating that which is not an object (i.e., a subject) as though it were an object.⁸

Third, the experience changed the way that I thought about myself at the time: now I could be “something that just gets men off.” In other words, I internalized the gaze of the Other by becoming object-like (an effect that was not permanent, I do not think). An important question about the nature of objectification is whether the one objectified *always* has to take on qualities of objects for objectification to occur. In other words, is objectification necessarily a relation between someone (or something) with an objectifying perspective and someone who is actually objectified by it? Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin seem to say “yes.” For them, objectification is the dynamic of women’s subordination, so that to be a woman is to be objectified and hence subordinated. For objectification to have the effect of subordination, it must be embodied in the subject such that the subject becomes object-like, one would think. MacKinnon says that women’s objectification “becomes *embodied* because it is enforced.”⁹ Dworkin writes, “the brilliance of objectification as a strategy of dominance is that it gets the woman to take the initiative in her own degradation.”¹⁰

Note that a woman could embody her objectification or take the initiative in her own degradation without *internalizing* the objectifying gaze. I internalized the attitude of the men at Hydro to some degree, but I did not have to do so to be objectified (i.e., to be made into an object). Say that I had worked at Hydro still at the time that my picture went up and I frequently encountered men joking about it. I did not defend myself in part because these men had significant power over me, because they were men, most of them were older than me, and they had seniority at Hydro. I even made the effort to make them think that their comments did not faze me—that I even thought they were funny—because to seem at all irritated by them would have brought on a new insult: being labeled a bitch. Hence, I took some initiative in my own degradation, but I never believed that I deserved to be treated that way.

So the one objectified can, at least superficially, embody an objectifying gaze without internalizing it. The question still remains of whether that attitude *must* be embodied for objectification to occur. Sally Haslanger writes that for MacKinnon, “the relation of objectification that constitutes gender requires both attitude and act. Gender is a distinction of power that is *read into* and *imposed upon* women.”¹¹ I think that objectification can be pure attitude, in which case it is not imposed on anyone, at least not anyone who is real. For example, one could imagine the photographer on the sidelines catching glimpses of my crotch and forming an objectifying attitude toward me by allowing that part of me to represent me in a way that it surely does not. He does not have to act at all to be objectifying me. Objectification can still be a relation of one person objectifying another when it is pure attitude; the other simply becomes an object only in the objectifier’s mind.

We are beginning to see how complex objectification is. To add even more complexity, consider that it need not have an effect on the one objectified not only because it can be pure attitude, but also because some *acts* even of objectification will not produce an effect.¹² Such acts can be successful or unsuccessful.¹³ What makes them successful depends on our ends in objectifying others, and our ultimate end may not be to have them become like objects. Usually our purpose *is* to do that: to have the ones objectified be passive, predictable, that which can be manipulated like objects, so that they satisfy a particular desire we have, which they would not do otherwise. We objectify others when we feel the need to control them, instead of allowing them to grow and change with their changing environments. Thus, men who want women to take on traditional female roles may do so in part by objectifying women. However, consider that a man might treat a woman as though she were an object only to increase his sense of power over women. Perhaps, the only goal the men at Hydro had in putting up my picture was to enhance their feelings of what Dworkin

calls “raw phallic power.”¹⁴ In that case, whether I, or any woman was objectified in reality by having the crotch shot on the wall was irrelevant to whether the act of putting it there was successful.

While more needs to be said about whether objectification can be simply an attitude and what would make it successful or unsuccessful as an act, I think it is clear that objectification does not have to be “*read into* and *imposed upon*”¹⁵ the one objectified. Still, objectification is probably a relation in which that person is made into an object at least in the objectifier’s mind. Even when men objectify women only to bolster their own sense of phallic power, they must imagine the women to be object-like through their gaze. I raise this issue, of whether objectification must be the sort of relation I have described, because it is relevant to an objection to my thesis that objectification admits of degrees.

Fourth, my story is almost mundane because of sexism. That I, a woman, have had such an experience is not altogether surprising, which suggests that oppressive social structures play a role in determining how or whether one is objectified. They make it common for female athletes to be valued more for their looks than their athletic ability, for example, and consequently objectified for their looks. They probably even explain in part why the photographer in my story took the picture that he did. He might not have *intended* to produce a crotch shot yet could have strived for one unconsciously because he knew that it would sell papers.

A final point about my story is that my objectification, by different people at different times, admitted of degrees. When my picture first hit the newspaper, it served at least two purposes: 1) to show off a sexual part of me, and 2) to introduce readers to one of the finalists in women’s singles (me). The crotch shot was not entirely gratuitous (unlike shots of Anna Kournikova, who rarely makes it to the finals, of singles anyway). However, the act of posting my picture at Hydro was gratuitous in that the only purpose the picture served at that point was to give men something to ogle at while they changed into their coveralls for work. So my objectification was both partial and

absolute, assuming that the idea of partial objectification makes sense, which we shall consider shortly. But first observe how feminists have portrayed women's objectification so narrowly that cases resembling mine (when I was both finalist and sex object) are excluded. Their work leaves little room for conceptualizing such acts as putting the crotch shot in the newspaper as objectification.

II. THE NARROW RANGE OF OBJECTIFICATION IN FEMINIST WORK

I shall focus on work relating to women's sexual lives as well as their reproductive lives, particularly those of women who are patients in fertility clinics. This work comes from such radical feminists as Dworkin, MacKinnon, Janice Raymond, and Gena Corea. Their descriptions of women's objectification are radical in at least two respects: 1) they assume that all objectification of women is morally wrong or sexist; and 2) they focus on absolute objectification to the exclusion of partial objectification. More moderate feminists, such as Martha Nussbaum and Sandra Lee Bartky, have responded to 1) but not 2): they have rejected the claim that all objectification of women (or men) is bad—objectification can be benign in their view—but they continue only to use examples where women are objectified absolutely. Thus, I contribute with this paper to a moderate feminist theory of objectification by arguing that degreed forms of objectification exist and that is relevant to modern sexism and other forms of oppression in the West. Women are sometimes objectified only to degrees, but that can still be oppressive.¹⁶

Before turning to the singular attention by feminists on absolute objectification, let me explain how objectification can be either benign or malign. Nussbaum's whole purpose in "Objectification" is to show why this distinction is plausible. She writes, "[i]n the matter of objectification, context is everything" (271), that is, it determines whether objectification is wrong or permissible. What matters most about context for her is whether there is "mutual respect and rough social equality" (275). The former, mutual respect exists in her view, it appears, if the one objectified consents to be objectified and the objectifier is aware of that and respects the limits of it. Bartky

gives an example of where a woman might consent or desire to be objectified: she writes, “surely there are times, in a sexual embrace perhaps, 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 absurdly out of place.”¹⁷ How would one know, however, whether the woman *really* wants that, especially if the person she is embracing has greater social power than she does? Nussbaum adds the criterion of rough social equality to eliminate the perhaps intractable problem of having to adjudicate whether consent is true or desire is authentic when the one being objectified is socially subordinate to the objectifier.

An important phenomenon that Nussbaum leaves out in determining how objectification can be benign is that of adaptive preferences.¹⁸ Even with a person who is roughly her equal in society, a woman’s desire to be “nothing but a sexually intoxicating body” can be suspect. In analyzing such a desire ethically, one has to consider its content. For example, does the woman want to be intoxicating in the way that some nameless, pouty model is (deemed) intoxicating? If so, we could legitimately wonder whether her preference is an adaptation to a sexist social environment. While adaptations are not in themselves suspect, certain environments are. And when the environment to which one adapts oneself is hostile to one’s flourishing, we need to be able to criticize the relevant preferences (i.e., presumably using some account of our flourishing).

The tricky thing upon acknowledging that people can modify their preferences to adapt to oppressive circumstances is deciding what to do upon discovering that someone’s preferences *are* adaptive in that way. Should one force the person to adopt new preferences? Would such an act not itself be oppressive? Alternatively, one might try to persuade the person to change her preferences, assuming that it matters to whether objectification is benign or malign not only what preferences a person *should* have, but also what preferences she does have (or ends up with after attempts at persuasion). Perhaps, objectification is benign only if the person prefers it and her preferences are

not adaptive in an oppressive way. This point will be relevant to our discussion below of how objectification admits of degrees.

By including cases in which women are objectified benignly, Nussbaum and Bartky broaden the range of women's objectification beyond what we get from MacKinnon and others. But is the range that even they acknowledge broad enough? I say "no," for neither treats the objectification of women as a degreed notion. Let us now see how starkly they and other feminists characterize women's objectification, distinguishing work on sexual objectification from work on reproductive objectification.

Women's Sexual Objectification

MacKinnon, Dworkin, Bartky, and Nussbaum primarily discuss sexual objectification. I shall begin with MacKinnon and Dworkin, who have similar views on the matter. Both argue that the social relations defining gender are sexually objectifying for women, and they depict such objectification as though it were absolute. To be a woman is to be pure sex object (simple as that; although many have argued that it is not so simple). MacKinnon writes, "objectification itself, with self-determination ecstatically *relinquished*, is the apparent content of women's sexual desire and desirability."¹⁹ Real women are "walking embodiments of men's projected needs."²⁰ They are "*exile[d]* ... from every realm of expression outside the strictly male-defined sexual or male-defined maternal,"²¹ becoming that "thing that enables [men] to experience raw phallic power."²²

Here is further evidence that for Dworkin and MacKinnon, men's sexual objectification of women is absolute. "[M]ost men cannot really tell the difference between [the average, educated woman] and Linda [Lovelace]," 'star' of the pornographic film, *Deep Throat*.²³ That is true in part because women are "seen *in* and *as* our violation."²⁴ "[Woman] is defined by how she is made, that hole, which is synonymous with entry."²⁵ "He's a citizen; she's a cunt."²⁶

Unlike Dworkin and MacKinnon, Bartky does not reduce women's oppression to their sexual objectification, although she sees the latter as an important element of the former. She illustrates with the story of the job candidate in philosophy (see my introduction), and with the following:

It is a fine spring day, and with an utter lack of self-consciousness, I am bouncing down the street. Suddenly, I hear men's voices. Catcalls and whistles fill the air. These noises are clearly sexual in intent and they are meant for me.... I freeze. As Sartre would say, I have been petrified by the gaze of the Other.... Blissfully unaware, breasts bouncing, ... I could have passed by without having been turned to stone. But I must be *made* to know that I am a 'nice piece of ass.'"²⁷

Here, she is objectified absolutely. She is turned to stone. Rather than being numbed by the gaze of the Other, she is frozen by it.

Nussbaum gives numerous literary and media examples to illustrate objectification, mostly of a sexual nature (and of men as well as women). Her own analyses of the examples suggest that they are of absolute objectification.²⁸ Many involve completely reducing others to bodily parts, particularly genitals. An example involving men is Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*, in which the protagonist contemplates the penises of anonymous men in the shower room at a club as if their penises defined them (255). The example Nussbaum gives of women's objectification that is particularly interesting to me involves pictures in *Playboy* of actor "Nicollette Sheridan playing at the Chris Evert Pro-Celebrity Tennis Classic, her skirt hiked up to reveal her black underpants. Caption: 'Why We Love Tennis'" (253). Nussbaum evaluates the example this way: the "caption reduces the young actor <sic>, a skilled tennis player, to a body ripe for male use: it says, in effect, she thinks she is displaying herself as a skilled athletic performer, but all the while she is actually displaying herself to *our* gaze as a sexual object" (her emphasis; 254, 55). She is a mere sex object, not both skilled athletic performer *and* sex object.²⁹

Bartky and Nussbaum both suggest that it can be liberating for women to be sexually objectified, depending on the context. Here, they side with feminists to whom radicals refer not so

fondly as “sexual liberals.” Left out of this debate is the partial sexual objectification of women; we get only absolute objectification, good or bad.

Women’s Reproductive Objectification

Women’s objectification is relevant to feminist reproductive ethics, not only to feminist ethics on women’s sexuality. “Just as women have to fight against the degrading identification of themselves with parts of their body in the area of sexuality (for example, as ‘cunt,’ ‘piece of ass,’ etc.) so, too, must women fight against the psychologically oppressive objectifications of themselves in the area of reproduction.”³⁰ And they must do so in particular surrounding the use of artificial reproductive technologies (ARTs), as many feminists have argued.

Radical feminists, Raymond and Corea, claim that ARTs and practices (e.g., *in vitro* fertilization, surrogacy) inherently objectify women. They can only be acceptable to a society in which women are already objectified as “breeders,” and they promote such a society. Hence, the titles of two of Raymond and Corea’s works: *Women as Wombs*³¹ and *The Mother Machine*,³² respectively. Raymond writes that the technologies and relevant procedures are “a form of medical violence against women”; they are “brutality with a therapeutic face.”³³ Corea says that they buttress “male power over women” by objectifying women as breeders. Women who consent to them are “agents of male power.”³⁴

Some feminists have countered such pessimism by pointing out that some women find ARTs beneficial and are in positions to resist being mere mother machines.³⁵ Such theorists acknowledge that women’s oppression and liberation in the realm of reproduction occur along a continuum (and therefore can be degreed). They do so when they criticize radical feminists for invoking dualistic constructions in which the technologies themselves are either repressive or liberatory, women’s desire to reproduce is either socially constructed or natural, and the like (siding in each case with the left side of the binary.) However, the moderates highlight the positive end of

the continuum (having reproductive freedom) more than the negative (being a breeder). They emphasize that some women have freedom of choice or that some can resist. They do not discuss the potential harm of objectifying women partially.

Moderates therefore tend to replace the emphasis by radicals on women's objectification with an emphasis on their agency or autonomy in feminist debates about ARTs. They do not refer to good objectification over bad, as feminists do in the sexuality debates. However, radicals and moderates in both domains (sexuality and reproduction), who focus on how women are objectified, tend only to use cases where women are treated as mere means. Perhaps their intent is merely to provide clear cases for analysis. But if that is true, clarity comes at the expense of obscuring the reality of women's objectification. Let us turn now to what that reality is.

III. THE BROADER RANGE IN REALITY

The quotations above from feminist work exhibit absoluteness in terms of either the gaze of the objectifier or the potential effect on the one objectified. In both cases, partialness is possible as well as absoluteness. In this section, I illustrate how partial objectification is directed towards and affects women in ways that are oppressive. How much such objectification occurs is an empirical question that may be ripe for analysis, but is not answerable here. I make only tentative generalizations on that subject.

Think of the objectifying gaze first and consider MacKinnon's statement about objectification being the content of women's desirability. In other words, women are desirable to men only as objects, not subjects.

Sex Object and Intimate Partner

Surely, women are sometimes both sex object and intimate partner. They are desirable not only for their bodies or for how well they conform to oppressive stereotypes about women's sexuality, but also for themselves as subjects. They are not mere Linda Lovelace equivalents. To

assume otherwise, as Dworkin and MacKinnon do, is overly pessimistic. Still, to presume that women are normally desired *only* for their personalities and not at all in terms of how well they live up to oppressive standards for women would be overly optimistic. Most of us (men and women) have internalized such standards to some degree. We have to make a concerted effort *not* to allow them to mediate our interactions with intimate others, if that is our ideal. So although absolute malign objectification may not characterize all intimate partnerships, partial malign objectification is probably a feature of many of them.

Bosom and Legitimate Job Candidate

Partial sexual objectification occurs not only in sexual relations, but also in workplace relations. Consider again Bartky's example of the breast-obsessed chair. One could easily imagine (and one may have experienced) a chair not staring fixedly at a candidate's breasts in an academic interview, but showing an inappropriate interest in them. Nonetheless, the chair thinks of the candidate seriously as a potential future colleague; to him, she is both potential colleague and object for sexual gratification. His objectification of her is partial, and given the context (an academic interview, the inequality of power in the relationship), it is almost certainly malign objectification.

The above example is probably more representative of women's objectification in the workplace, particularly for female professionals, than the example where the candidate is mere bosom. Affirmative action programs in most professions are not so strong that women are hired *only* because they are women, or bosoms (contrary to what some people claim). Women's professional skills are also relevant. However, so is their conformity to social standards of femininity, which explains why many people deem it appropriate to criticize female professionals harshly if their demeanor or appearance is masculine, even though their work may be exemplary.

Breeder and Health Care Patient

Similar complexity exists in how female patients are valued in infertility treatment contexts; it is doubtful that they are mere breeders. Raymond and Corea say that ARTs objectify women absolutely, which implies that all women who find them helpful, even if only to a degree, are mere dupes.³⁶ Such an assumption is uncharitable as well as extreme. Raymond and Corea's view also suggests that physicians who work in reproductive endocrinology have little to no concern for women's welfare; they could not if they are willing to impose such violent technologies and procedures upon women. But surely that is unfair. My experience of working with some of these physicians has taught me that some care a lot about their patients. Nonetheless, my interactions with and research on women who have undergone infertility treatment reveal that *partial* malign forms of objectification by physicians do occur in some clinics. To illustrate, consider this remark by a patient: "They praised my 'good response' (shown in blood work and ultrasound results) to the medication used to induce ovulation, while paying comparatively little attention to my concern that I had lost fifteen pounds because of the stress of one treatment cycle."³⁷ This patient made it clear to me and to her physicians that she was not willing to get pregnant at any cost. She did not objectify herself as a mere reproductive vessel. However, her care providers objectified her in that way *to some degree* when they valued her success in treatment (defined in terms of getting a baby in the end) more than her psychological well-being, which they did not ignore entirely, but to which they paid insufficient attention. She was not a *mere* number to them—a potential breeder that might improve their success rates, but she was not fully respected as a person either: that is, as someone with her own goals and preferences.

We have considered how the objectifying gaze on women can be and is perhaps often partial. Now think about the one objectified and whether she embodies that gaze only to degrees, if at all.

Grasping Self as Object and Moral Agent

Is it true that today most women in the West are “walking embodiments of men’s projected needs”? Do they see themselves or behave as though they were pure objects of male desire? I doubt it. While many women experience objectification by men and embody it, many are also partially autonomous at least, which we would not be if we were mere things designed to fulfill male needs. Surely, we are made to feel like complete objects some of the time, such as when strange men leer at us in a piercing way or when we experience unwanted advances by men who really do see us as pieces of meat. But many of us respect ourselves enough and are respected by others enough that we do not always embody such malign perspectives. Still, we might see ourselves as partial objects much of the time. The steady, but not singular concern that many women have with their weight, or with their appearance in general, suggests that many women internalize partial objectification.

In this section, I have shown that partial, malign objectification of women occurs both from the perspective of the objectifier and from that of the one objectified. But one might ask whether the phenomenon I have illustrated throughout is truly objectification. Is a woman *objectified* who feels the pressure of society’s beauty standards for women, but who does not define her worth solely or even primarily in terms of those standards? The term “objectification” may be too extreme in this context. Why is that *not* the case?

IV. HOW OBJECTIFICATION ADMITS OF DEGREES

Nussbaum’s theory of objectification is particularly useful for showing that partial objectification exists. In a number of ways, the theory allows for and even presupposes degrees of objectification. I shall explain why that is true and describe other virtues of the theory to justify my use of it here.

It is Nussbaum who writes that objectification is about “treating *as an object* what is really not an object, what is,” as she adds, “a human being.”³⁸ The notion of humanity she adopts (and which

others before her adopt, e.g., MacKinnon) is Kantian: a human being is a rational, self-determining being who should be respected as such.³⁹ Nussbaum goes on to say that human beings can be treated as objects in multiple ways; and hence, that objectification comes in a variety of forms (257).

1. *Instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of 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 experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.⁴⁰

Implicit here is a certain conception of objects, as well as of persons or subjects. Usually (but not always), objects are passive, inert matter that can, with impunity, be manipulated, owned, used, and substituted for one another. Ideally, the same is not true of persons. I want to assume that these conceptions are roughly correct.

Nussbaum explains how each form of objectification is distinct from the others. For example, we can deny someone's autonomy without treating that person as an instrument for our use. We can claim to own someone without denying his subjectivity (which involves failing to ask such questions as "What is this person likely to feel if I do X?").⁴¹ Further, we can deny subjectivity without presuming fungibility: that is, deny that a person is a subject without assuming that he is interchangeable with other subjects, which he may not be if his body, and his body alone, satisfies a particular desire we have, say for *his* chest, with its own special shape and feel.

According to Nussbaum, we sometimes treat any one of the different forms of objectification as sufficient for objectification to occur (258), which she does not find troubling, although I think that she should, particularly with regard to the denial of autonomy. Clearly, we can

deny the autonomy of animals or of children without objectifying them, which of course does not mean that we cannot objectify them. Nussbaum makes room for their objectification by suggesting that each form of objectification could be sufficient. Deny the subjectivity of a gorilla and we objectify the gorilla.

To apply this theory to a specific case, consider again my narrative with which we began this paper. Any or all of the forms of objectification Nussbaum identifies could have been present in the attitudes of the men who put up my picture at Hydro. They could have imagined me lacking autonomy and subjectivity, being inert and even owned by them. They probably saw me at least as an instrument of sexual pleasure and as fungible with other women whose bodies resembled mine. (I must have been fungible to them because they did not even know me. Their attention could not have been drawn to anything other than general qualities that I could easily share with other women.) The effect of their act on me was to have me see myself as a sexual tool. (Again, I was something that could get men off.) The only form of objectification that I embodied was instrumentality.

One might consider it unusual for the one objectified to feel like an instrument specifically. Normally, the impact of objectification is more general than that: the person just feels more “bodily” or feels a heightened sense of embodiment. If that were true, distinguishing among various forms of objectification as Nussbaum does would be inappropriate from the perspective of the one objectified. However, the view here about objectification is false for two reasons. One is that people can be objectified for their minds (as child protégés are), which surely would not enhance a sense of embodiment. The other is that people can certainly feel objectified in ways that correspond to the different forms on Nussbaum’s list. For example, my partner cheats on me and I feel fungible. He questions whether my decisions really match my values, making me believe that I am less autonomous than I actually am. In each case, I may feel more embodied than usual (e.g., feel like a

body rather than an autonomous being), but that is not all that I feel, and different actions of my partner produce different sorts of feelings.

Beyond being accurate in terms of how we can be objectified and objectify others, Nussbaum alludes to a further advantage of separating out the different forms of objectification: it allows us to see how objectification can be benign.⁴² Failing to separate them makes that more difficult (which is a criticism Nussbaum makes of MacKinnon and Dworkin: 270). If one thought that treating someone as an object meant treating them in all or most of the ways Nussbaum describes—as inert, lacking in subjectivity, as an instrument, *etcetera*—it would be hard ever to condone objectification. If the objectification of a patient by a heart surgeon meant that the patient was not only violable and fungible with other bodies with hearts, but also a mere instrument, one that could be owned by the surgeon, the practice of surgery would raise much greater moral concern than it does already.

A further advantage of Nussbaum's account, to which she does not allude, is that it helps us to see how objectification can be degreed. It does that in a number of ways. One is that each of the forms it identifies admits of degrees. For example, we deny someone's subjectivity to different degrees when we approach such questions as "What is this person likely to feel?" with different levels of seriousness. Consider a physician who, accompanied by a group of medical students, enters an exam room of a patient whom she has never met before. She says to the patient, "You don't mind if these people join us, do you?" Clearly, she does not take seriously the question of what the patient would feel or want. But neither does she ignore that question altogether. If she did, she would not even ask whether the patient minded the intrusion.

Other forms of objectification can also come in degrees. We can think of others as fungible, violable, or lacking in autonomy to different degrees. Just as we can be partial owners, we can treat people as partially owned. Further, we can recognize someone to be mostly inert, but not entirely so,

such as a child who is petrified by lightening, but who could still run if he really had to. Finally, someone can be an instrument for us, but not wholly an instrument. For example, if I am chatty with and nice to the checkout boy as I use him as a means to get out of the grocery store in the proper fashion, I probably do not treat him as a mere means.

A second reason why Nussbaum's theory allows us to conceive of degrees of objectification is that by "uncoupling" (to use her term) the different forms from one another—by noticing that they do not necessarily accompany one another—it is just easier to think of degrees of objectification. The point is similar to the one Nussbaum makes about benign objectification: if the different modes were inseparable, it would be hard to imagine how objectification could be benign. Similarly, if every time we objectified someone, we had to assume that the person had all of the qualities we normally associate with objects (e.g., fungibility, lacking autonomy and subjectivity, inertness, and the like), then that person could not be much more than an object in our minds, one would think. Dworkin and MacKinnon create that impression of men's objectification of women by suggesting that for men, women are not only instruments of sexual pleasure, they also lack autonomy, subjectivity, and are both violable and fungible (as the quotations in section II illustrate). In other words, Dworkin and MacKinnon portray absoluteness in men's treatment of women as objects not only by making such bold claims as "man is citizen; woman is cunt," but also by suggesting that the different forms of objectification always come together, including when men objectify women.

Perhaps disentangling the different forms makes room for degrees of objectification in another way. One might assume that some forms can only be absolute in conjunction with others: perhaps, pure instrumentality can only exist along with the denial of subjectivity, for example. But if each mode were sufficient for objectification to occur, as Nussbaum allows, then partial objectification must be possible. Consider first whether pure instrumentality requires the denial of

subjectivity. Unless I assume that the checkout boy has no feelings or desires of his own, I do not treat him as a mere instrument. But surely that must depend on my purpose in instrumentalizing him. If I want to get through the checkout without having to acknowledge anyone (I would prefer automatic checkout, but it is rare where I live), then for the boy to be a pure instrument for me, I would have to deny his subjectivity. But what if what I wanted was to have my groceries packed well, with the stuff that could get squashed on top? If that were my main goal, it would be wise to acknowledge the boy, which would probably make him a better instrument for my purposes. (He would not just pack the bags any old way, thinking what a *jerk* I am.)

Similarly, one might think that denying autonomy is essential for other forms to be absolute, such as fungibility; but that would be a mistake. Someone who is autonomous has a mind of her own, which implies that she could not be entirely fungible (or entirely an instrument, a piece of property, *etcetera*). However, consider that a sadist for whom one tortured person is as good as any other may not ignore or deny the autonomy of his victims. (And note that denying autonomy is not the same as lacking respect for it; once one denies someone's autonomy, one cannot have respect for it.) In fact, the victims' autonomy or capacity for autonomy may be important to him because it means that they can be tortured more than they could otherwise be. Still, they are completely interchangeable to him insofar as they are roughly equal in their ability to be tortured.⁴³

I think it is possible for each form of objectification to be absolute on its own, which means that assuming each to be sufficient on their own for objectification to occur does not open up conceptual space for partial objectification. However, Nussbaum's theory might create that space in yet another way. Recall that the main point of her paper is to establish that objectification can be benign. I suggested that whether it is in fact benign depends on whether the one objectified prefers it and whether her preferences are adaptive to an oppressive social environment. If her *actual* preferences are relevant (as opposed to the preferences she should have), then the person

objectifying her should be aware of them and how they might change over time to avoid objectifying her in a malign way. Such awareness precludes absolute objectification in the forms of denying subjectivity or autonomy. And if that is true, benign objectification of those forms will always be partial. People who objectify one another benignly in a sexual encounter, for example, do not deny one another's subjectivity absolutely. Doing so would be a recipe for sexual assault.

Thus, if objectification can be benign and if it comes in distinct forms that admit of degrees, partial objectification is possible. Women therefore can be partially objectified, presumably in both malign and benign ways, and in ways that promote sexism and other forms of oppression.

Objections remain, however, to the very idea of partial objectification. Let me turn to them now.

V. OBJECTIONS

I shall deal with two potentially serious objections. One concerns whether my view assumes a radical dichotomy of subject/object, which would be problematic; and the other denies that "partial objectification" is objectification at all as opposed to disrespect.

The first objection emphasizes that subjects are normally embodied and so are not entirely distinct from objects. To assume otherwise would be to accept a radical duality of subject and object, which many feminists and others rightly reject.⁴⁴ Treating subjects as partial objects *is* appropriate; no difference exists between how we should treat a subject qua subject and the partial objectification of the subject. By ignoring this fact, I have implicitly assumed a radical subject/object split.

Note that this objection establishes not that partial objectification does not occur, but that it is appropriate. What the objection fails to explain is that it is not always appropriate, even if we understand persons or subjects to be embodied. To paraphrase Bartky, surely there are times when attention paid to anything *other* than a woman's mathematical ability is absurdly out of place (e.g., in a math class or in an interview for a math job). The same goes for a woman's ability to play tennis

(i.e., sometimes, it should be the sole focus of attention). Even though subjects and persons are inherently embodied, their embodiment is not always relevant to how we should treat them.

The second objection goes like this: what I call degrees of objectification are simply instances of treating persons without the full respect they deserve. Such treatment is disrespectful, but not objectifying. Now why would one want to make this distinction? Well, it is obvious that treating someone as a mere means is a form of disrespect that is objectifying. But if treating someone as a partial means is also objectifying, then will not all disrespect be objectification, in which case the two are indistinguishable and that seems counter-intuitive? It does seem that way to me, although it would not to everyone, including Kant for whom disrespect simply involved treating people as means.

My response to this objection is not to admit that all disrespect is objectification, but to distinguish the two in the following ways: 1) objectification can be benign unlike disrespect; and 2) the former is a relation in a way that the latter is not. Disrespect can exist without the one disrespected being reduced or degraded or without imagining that to be the case. I can act disrespectfully or have a disrespectful attitude toward someone but not diminish that person's self-respect or even think anything of it. By contrast objectification makes the one objectified into an object, partially or absolutely, in reality or only in the imagination of the objectifier. I admit that malign objectification is a form of disrespect, but not even that those two are identical.

VI. CONCLUSION

Degrees of objectification therefore cannot be reduced to disrespect, they exist, and surely they can be morally wrong just like absolute forms of objectification. Such insights are important for feminists because in the West at least, much of women's objectification is probably now degreed, but could nonetheless be oppressive. The reason why it would be degreed lies in women's empowerment relative to a time when they were mere chattel, which allows many women to have

some say over how they are treated, in both sexual and reproductive contexts. Still, they may not have enough say that no one objectifies them in ways that are morally harmful.

Such speculations require empirical support than I have not given in this paper. What I have done is the conceptual work that should underlie any descriptive account of oppressive forms of the objectification of women. These accounts should investigate how women are treated not only as mere means, but also as partial means.⁴⁵

Notes

¹ The language of “mere” and “only” appears in *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. T.K. Abbott (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), especially pp. 56-58.

² It is the subject of a paper by Todd Calder to be presented at the Eastern conference of the American Philosophical Association (2002). The title is “Kant and Degrees of Wrongness.”

³ See “On Psychological Oppression,” in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 27.

⁴ “Objectification,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* vol. 24, no. 4 (1995): 249-291.

⁵ They were not original in doing so. Someone testified at hearings in Minneapolis about harm posed by pornography about “working men plaster[ing] women’s crotches on the walls of workplaces.” See *In Harm’s Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*, by A. Dworkin and C. MacKinnon (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 6.

⁶ See Bartky, “On Psychological Oppression,” pp. 26, 27.

⁷ The term “consummate expression” is Jeremy Bendik-Keymer’s (personal communication). I owe this point to him.

⁸ Nussbaum, “Objectification,” p. 257.

⁹ *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 119, her emphasis.

¹⁰ *Intercourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), p. 142.

¹¹ S. Haslanger, “On Being Objective and Being Objectified,” in *A Mind of One’s Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, eds. Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt, 2nd ed (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2002), p. 225, her emphasis.

¹² I thank Christine Overall and Sue Sherwin for bringing this point to my attention.

¹³ John Hardwig first gave me the idea that acts of objectification can be successful or unsuccessful.

¹⁴ *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Perigee Books, 1981), p. 128.

¹⁵ Haslanger, “On Being Objective,” p. 225, her emphasis.

¹⁶ Objectification is sexist, or oppressive in general, if it targets one’s membership in an oppressed group (e.g., women) and if it is systemic. See Bartky, “On Psychological Oppression.”

¹⁷ “On Psychological Oppression,” p. 26.

¹⁸ On adaptive preferences, see Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), and Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Nussbaum leaves out this phenomenon despite discussing it in *Sex and Social Justice*, where “Objectification” also appears.

¹⁹ *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 139, my emphasis; quoted in Nussbaum, “Objectification,” p. 269, fn 37.

²⁰ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory*, p. 119.

²¹ Dworkin, *Pornography*, p. 22, my emphasis.

²² Dworkin, *Pornography*, p. 128.

²³ MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 12.

²⁴ MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 100.

²⁵ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, p. 123.

²⁶ The quotation is from a section written by Dworkin of *In Harm's Way*, p. 34.

²⁷ "On Psychological Oppression," p. 27.

²⁸ She summarizes what is going on in them, and suggests that each is about seeing the other as nothing but an object. See "Objectification," pp. 254, 255.

²⁹ Most of the examples here from feminist work involve the objectification of beautiful female bodies. However, people sometimes objectify women for their ugliness rather than their beauty (as Rebecca Kukla stressed to me at the conference at which we presented our work for this volume). This point comes out clearly in Iris Marion Young's, "The Scaling of Bodies" (*Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). She describes how oppression can be "aversive," where dominant groups feel repulsed by those whom they dominate. Some women's bodies are defined as objects to be averted.

Young is somewhat of an exception among feminists who have written on objectification in that she implicitly acknowledges the degreed nature of women's objectification. She refers to the "aesthetic scaling of bodies" in Western culture. Beautiful, youthful bodies form the apex of the scale and "degenerate" bodies, the nadir (128). Oppressed people have degenerate bodies, which are objectified in her view (as are beautiful bodies, but Young does not acknowledge that). The idea that bodies are "scaled" suggests that degrees of degeneracy exist. And if all degenerate bodies are objectified, then degrees of objectification must also exist.

³⁰ K. P. Morgan, "Of *Woman* Born? How Old-fashioned!—New Reproductive Technologies and Women's Oppression," in *The Future of Human Reproduction*, ed. Christine Overall (Toronto, ON: The Women's Press, 1989), p. 73.

³¹ J. Raymond, *Women as Wombs: Reproductive Technologies and The Battle over Women's Freedom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

³² G. Corea, *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

³³ *Women as Wombs*, pp. viii, xix.

³⁴ *The Mother Machine*, p. 4.

³⁵ See A. Donchin, "Feminist Critiques of New Fertility Technologies: Implications for Social Policy," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* vol. 21, no. 5, (1996): 475-498; and J. Sawicki, "Disciplining Mothers: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies," in *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

³⁶ Donchin makes that point in "Feminist Critiques."

³⁷ The statement comes from an unpublished narrative that this patient wrote about her treatment and which she kindly shared with me.

³⁸ "Objectification," p. 257, her emphasis.

³⁹ The definition excludes the objectification of animals, which is problematic, for animals are not objects, although they can be treated as such. However, in filling out her account, Nussbaum makes room for their objectification, as we shall see.

⁴⁰ I endorse the idea that objectification comes in these different forms, but one might think that is inconsistent with my title, which emphasizes only one form: namely instrumentality. Treating people as mere means involves treating them as instruments for our use. But is that necessarily true of Kantian means? One could read Kant as saying that treating people as means involves placing them in the class of objects that, *among other things*, can be mere instruments (see Dennis Klimchuk's "Three Counts of Respect for Persons," forthcoming in *Kantian Review*). Instrumentality does not have to be their defining property. Support for such a view comes from examples of disrespect in

Kant that do not involve someone getting something out of being disrespectful. (So the person disrespected does not have to be a means to the other person's ends.)

⁴¹ Nussbaum, "Objectification," p. 265.

⁴² Given how this advantage supports her thesis (that objectification can be benign), it is surprising that Nussbaum does not make the point more forcefully than she does.

⁴³ I owe this example to Betsy Postow.

⁴⁴ MacKinnon herself does that in *Toward a Feminist Theory*, pp. 120, 121, and so does Evelyn Fox Keller in *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁴⁵ Earlier versions of this paper were presented to audiences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, at the 2002 conference of the North American Society for Social Philosophy, and at the conference organized for this volume. I wish to thank them all for their helpful comments. Special thanks go to Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, who was very generous with his time, Samantha Brennan, John Hardwig, Dennis Klimchuk, Jim Okapal, Christine Overall, and Susan Sherwin.