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Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics
Ann J. Cahill
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The central argument of Ann Cahill's *Overcoming Objectification* is that the concept of sexual *objectification* should be replaced by Cahill's concept of *derivatization* in order to better capture what is unethical about certain ways of representing and treating people (typically women), such as in sex work, sexual violence, and representations of women in the media and in pornography. Her writing style clearly shows that she has in mind an advanced scholarly audience and not an undergraduate one. The book is written in dense and technical prose, presupposes a philosophical background, and is too narrowly focused to be adopted in its entirety as a teaching text. Nevertheless, the concept of sexual objectification is a frequently employed concept in academic and public discourse about feminism, gender, and sexuality, and I agree with Cahill that the concept needs to be replaced. Therefore, I think Cahill's thesis is worth discussing in an advanced undergraduate course. I assigned selections of Cahill's text to my senior level Philosophy and Women class and was able to fruitfully connect the concept of derivatization with other readings in the course. I will describe the thesis of the book, how I used it in my own course, and some criticisms that I have and that arose from class discussion.

Objectification involves treating someone like a thing and an object, rather than as a person and a subject. Cahill points out that the idea that it is inherently degrading to treat someone as an object has its origins in a narrow, Kantian conception of persons as essentially rational and autonomous beings whose embodied aspect lacks value and whose urges and impulses are something to be overcome. In recent years, however, many philosophers, and feminist philosophers in particular, have rejected this narrow conception of a person in favor of one that more completely acknowledges and respects the physical, emotional, intersubjective, and sexual nature of the self. If we reject the narrow rational-autonomous conception of persons, however, then it is not clear that we can consistently continue to say that it is inherently degrading to treat people as objects. This seems particularly true in sexual contexts. Cahill rightly points out that being seen and treated as a sex object, that is, as a body that is the object of sexual desire, can be both pleasurable and enhancing to one's sense of self.

Cahill also finds that the concept of objectification is not a good fit for many of the kinds of degrading images and practices that are typically labeled as objectifying. She points out that many images in pornography and in the mainstream media that depict women as objects of sexual desire also depict women as *subjects* of sexual desire. In other words, they are often depicted as choosing and desiring the sexual encounter or sexual gaze, and often that depiction of women as *willing* to submit to the sexual encounter or gaze is an important part of what makes these images arousing to the viewer. Similarly, the image of the dominatrix is one that represents a woman as an autonomous subject. If there is something objectionable about this

way of representing women, it is not because they are thereby made into passive objects or things.

Cahill introduces the concept of *derivatization* as a more accurate way of capturing the wrongness of degrading images and practices without depending on an objectionably narrow and disembodied conception of self. "To derivatize," Cahill says, "is to portray, render, understand, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection, or expression of another being's identity, desires, fears, etc. The derivatized subject becomes reducible in all relevant ways to the derivatizing subject's existence—other elements of her… being or subjectivity are disregarded, ignored, or undervalued" (32). To derivatize someone is not to treat her as a non-person, but rather to treat her as a derivative person, reducing her to an aspect of another's being. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's theories of intersubjectivity and sexual difference, Cahill claims that the harm involved in derivatization is a failure to acknowledge a person's ontological distinctiveness.

I assigned to my class selected sections that presented Cahill's main thesis and some of its applications. My students, as expected, found the text to be dense and difficult to understand. Nevertheless, they were able to carry on an insightful discussion about it. One student observed that Cahill is employing the concept of derivatization at two apparently different levels. On the one hand, derivatization is treating or representing someone so that their identity is nothing more than a projection of another person's fantasies, desires, or expectations. At this level, it seems like a straightforward description. In order to explain the harm involved in derivatization, however, Cahill often appeals to a more metaphysical description of derivatization, saying that it denies a person's "ontological distinctiveness." Although Cahill does provide some explanation of this term by grounding it in Irigaray's theory of sexual difference, she never makes it as clear as one would like. This makes it difficult to evaluate whether the types of interactions Cahill identifies as derivatizing really do harm us in this way. Another concern raised by class members was that Cahill's concept of derivatization might capture too much, so that too many of our ordinary practices of judging and categorizing people according to our expectations will turn out to be derivatizing actions. When we appreciate the natural necessity of applying pre-existing categories to ourselves and others, and when we take into account how often these identifying categories inevitably derive from the qualities, interests, and expectations of others, Cahill's insistence that ethical interactions be non-derivatizing may be an impossible standard. For instance, there seems to be nothing degrading about describing my friend as a good cook and an 'A' student, but do I not thereby portray her according to norms and expectations that derive from outside of herself? Do I not represent her identity in a way that renders it derivative of the desires and expectations of eaters and teachers?

This last concern points to a more general failure of the book to recognize the degree to which derivatization must be contextual. Cahill claims that a virtue of the concept of derivatization is that we can identify individual instances of derivatization as harmful regardless of context (50, 53). I doubt whether this is correct. Individual representations and interactions are inevitably likely to focus on selected aspects of a person, aspects that are made salient by the social context, including the ability of a person to fulfill certain desires or expectations. It is usually quite harmless to acknowledge that aspects of other people fulfill or fail to fulfill desires and expectations. Cahill acknowledges that these kinds of interactions only become harmful when we treat people as *nothing more than* extensions of the desires and expectations of others. But it is unreasonable to expect every individual interaction to reflect the complexity and independence of a person's identity. Instead, we should demand that images and interactions

that emphasize derivative aspects of an identity be balanced out by their location in a larger context that acknowledges the non-derivative aspects of the identity. For example, sexualized images of women in the media tend to call attention exclusively to one aspect of women's identity – their ability to be sexually appealing to men. When considered individually, most of these images strike us as fairly harmless. It is not intrinsically unethical for advertisers to present images of women that are pleasing and attention grabbing, or for movie directors to try to emphasize the attractiveness of their female characters. When we consider the preponderance of sexualized images of women *together*, however, and when we take into account the relative dearth of representations of other aspects of women, the total effect is derivatizing; taken together they tend to represent women as though they have no other identity apart from their attractiveness to men. Moreover, when set within this context, the chosen emphasis of *individual* media images then begins to seem objectionable. I suspect that many or most other instances of derivatization also represent someone as *merely* derivative at least in part because of the social contexts and patterns in which they are situated. This example shows the limits of the usefulness of the concept of derivatization as a yardstick for measuring the morality of isolated images, remarks, or actions. But at the same time, I think this example demonstrates that when we take account of social context, the concept of derivatization can help explain how positive depictions of sex and of sexually appealing bodies become degrading or disempowering.

Following our class discussion of Cahill, I assigned two fictional stories that depict interesting examples of derivatization. The first was Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* from which I assigned passages describing the character Janie's marriage to Joe Starks. Janie has to conform her appearance and behavior to match her husband's conception of what a mayor's wife should be like. In doing so, she becomes an extension of Joe's ambitions and a derivative of Joe's personality. Janie finally describes her situation by saying, "Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me." This seems like a clear case where the concept of derivatization describes the nature of the harm done to Janie, although it is not a case of objectification. The second story I assigned is a short story by Manuel Van Loggem called "Pairpuppets." It takes place in a futuristic dystopia where human sexual encounters are selected by computer and precisely scripted to be perfectly satisfying. In this world humans can also purchase realistic automata called "pairpuppets" designed to perfectly satisfy sexual desires. The human encounters described are highly derivatizing and the pairpuppets are fully derivative beings. The protagonist in the story finds both kinds of encounters to be ultimately boring and unsatisfying, precisely *because* the partners are derivative or derivatized. The story actually highlights one of Cahill's main themes, that healthy and ethical sexual encounters must acknowledge difference and intersubjectivity. Van Loggem's story illustrates how derivatizing sexual partners is not only potentially harmful to the person derivatized, but ultimately unsatisfying to those who interact with the derivatized partner.

In the following class sessions I assigned the topics of physical appearance, pornography, and prostitution, in order to allow my students to continue to apply the concept of derivatization. My students have continued to apply the term "derivatize" as we discuss these topics, although often their use of the term has become more or less synonymous with "degrade." In other words, they identify images and actions that treat people in a degrading manner, whether or not they actually treat someone as a derivative being. In this respect, I think the imprecision in their use of the term is no worse than the usual imprecision that we tend to see in the use of the term "objectification." The tendency to use these terms imprecisely probably points to more than the difficulty of mastering technical terminology. Like the concept of objectification, derivatization

does not entirely capture what we find intuitively objectionable about the family of sexual images and practices that are of concern to feminists. Indeed there may not be any single feature that all of these things have in common that makes them unethical. Nevertheless, Cahill's approach is an improvement over talking exclusively about objectification. Although it certainly does not end the conversation about what we should find objectionable in certain types of sexual representations and interactions, *Overcoming Objectification* advances that conversation by helping us to talk about sex in a way that does not start from the presupposition that physical expressions of sexuality are inherently debasing.

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