

Book Review

*Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and  
Objectification*, by Rae Langton

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more details about their relation with the Liar, would have been desirable.

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**Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification**, by Rae Langton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 405 pp.

*Sexual Solipsism* is an excellent collection of essays that collects some classic papers previously published by Langton, three new essays and several responses to critics. The book can be divided in three main topics. The first topic is pornography. In ‘Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts’ and a series of later papers Langton develops MacKinnon’s claim that pornography silences and subordinates women, drawing on Austin’s speech act theory.

The second main topic of the book is related to objectification and in particular to sexual objectification. Langton interestingly presents two aspects of sexual objectification that she says are related, the moral dimension and the epistemological one. The first type of objectification, the Kantian one, involves treating someone as an object. The second type of objectification, that she calls the ‘Humean’ dimension of objectification, involves taking something as objective which is merely projected by our minds.

The third topic is sexual solipsism. We encounter two types of local sexual solipsisms: in the first type, someone treats a thing as a person; in the second type, someone treats a person as a thing. Langton will argue that in pornography we have both types of solipsisms which are intertwined. She interestingly draws on Kant and tries to offer a solution that allows one to escape from solipsism. A more detailed view on solipsism and escape is presented in her last essay ‘Love and Solipsism.’

I will develop here only two of Langton’s arguments and some criticisms. The first argument I will present is her argument for the claim that pornography is an illocutionary act of subordinating and silencing women. In the second part I will focus on the first dimen-

sion of objectification and I will present in more detail Langton's criticism of Martha Nussbaum's account of autonomy and objectification.

I. It is worth noting that Langton uses a revisionary definition of pornography which is different from the one we usually use. So it is no criticism of Langton to say that pornography usually is not like this or that we do not use the term in this way. The definition of pornography is borrowed from MacKinnon. For her, pornography is

the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words that also includes women dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; enjoying pain or humiliation or rape; being tied up, cut up, mutilated, bruised, or physically hurt; in postures of sexual submission, servility or display; reduced to body parts, penetrated by objects or animals, or presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture; shown as filthy or inferior; bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual. (Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, Cambridge Mass., 1987, 176.)

MacKinnon distinguishes between pornography understood in this way and erotica, which might contain sexually explicit material that is 'premised on equality.' Although there are lots of criticisms of this definition of 'pornography,' we will take it for granted.

Langton's aims are quite modest. She is not committed to the claim that pornography silences and subordinates women. Her aim is to argue for the coherence and plausibility of MacKinnon's theory. Whether MacKinnon's claim is actually true depends on further empirical claims, for example the extent to which pornographers have authority.

Pornography for MacKinnon depicts subordination and helps to cause subordination and violence. But it also does more than this: it is itself the subordination of women. Langton argues that one way to understand such a claim is by appealing to speech act theory and understand pornography as a kind of speech act. So, how can pornography be an act of subordination?

Langton appeals to Austin's speech act theory that claims that some speech is also an act. For example, uttering 'I do' in the right context is an act of marrying. Some speech acts can be acts of subordination, according to Langton. Consider the example of apartheid in South Africa. The legislator in Pretoria who uttered 'Blacks are not

permitted to vote' in the right context (with the intention of enacting a law) made it the case that blacks were not permitted to vote. This is a locutionary act with a particular content, it has some perlocutionary effects (blacks do not go to the polling booths etc.) but it is also an act of subordinating blacks to whites: it ranks blacks as inferior, legitimates discriminatory behaviour against blacks and it deprives blacks of political powers. Langton claims that acts such as the speech acts of apartheid are 'authoritative illocutions.' If the utterer of the above utterance were not a legislator with power she would have failed to subordinate blacks. In Austinian terms, acts of ranking and valuing are verdictive acts and acts that permit, prohibit, authorize or enact laws are exercitives.

How is this case similar to the case of pornography? According to Langton pornography is verdictive speech because it ranks women as inferior and also exercitive speech because it legitimates rape and violence against women. So it incorporates both elements for being an illocutionary act of subordination.

Langton agrees that the pornography case does not fulfil all the felicity conditions for being an act of subordination (the pornographers do not usually intend to subordinate women). But, as Austin points out, there are cases of speech acts that manage to be the intended speech acts even if they are not a paradigmatic case. Pornography is such a case.

There are three arguments that Langton presents in order to show how we can support the claim that pornography is itself an act of subordination:

1. It seems to be an empirical fact that pornography has an impact on consumers causing them to view women as inferior, to make them believe rape myths (like women enjoying being raped) or to claim that they would rape if they were likely to get away with it. The best explanation for these perlocutionary effects of pornography is that pornography is itself an act of subordination.
2. There are some viewers which take it as an act of subordination. Langton argues that we have to favour one group of people over another in order to make sense of this claim. And the group we should favour is the group of women.
3. There are some felicity conditions met: the 'speakers' of pornography have authority in their domain. Their verdict matters in the sexual discourse. Langton agrees that this is an empirical contro-

versial claim. If it is the case that the pornographers have the authority MacKinnon says they have, then it is very probable that they subordinate women with their speech.

Langton also develops a further claim put forward by MacKinnon. Pornography also silences the speech of women. They make women's sexual refusal impossible and they do not allow them to protest against pornographers' speech. Pornography is doing this, Langton argues, by presenting women in porn as always wanting sex. Pornography can silence refusal in two ways. A woman says 'no,' the man understands she is refusing but he does not care and he rapes her. This is a form of perlocutionary silencing. Another way of silencing is the illocutionary silencing: a woman says 'no' but the man fails to take it as a refusal. He rapes her but fails to see he is a rapist. She calls this type of silencing *illocutionary disablement*.

How does pornography silence protest? Langton gives the example of Linda Marchiano. She was a porn star threatened and beaten to force her to be a porn star. She was also raped during the filming while threatened by her husband with a gun. She tried to give up the porn industry and she wrote a book in order to protest against the industry she was forced into. Her protest was not taken as a protest. Her book, *Ordeal*, was sold as pornography. Her protest was silenced.

II. There are a number of criticisms of Langton's arguments. Green and Butler doubt that pornography has the authority needed in order to subordinate. Moreover, it is not clear that women are under the jurisdiction of that authority. Dworkin and Jacobson criticize her account of 'free speech' as freedom of illocution. I think she convincingly answers all these worries. I will focus here on one of Jacobson's criticisms of her account and also on her reply to Butler's criticism, which is for the first time presented in this collection of essays.

I think it is crucial to respond to Jacobson's criticism as it implies that the silencing argument might have bad consequences for women.

Jacobson argues that the silencing argument has the undesirable consequence that certain cases of rape will not count as rape because the rapist has not understood the refusal. How is this possible? Remember the case of the illocutionary disablement. The woman tries to refuse sex; she says 'no' but she is not understood as refusing. Thus, she is not refusing. The man does not recognize that she is

trying to refuse and rapes her. If we accept this, Jacobson argues, we must accept the implausible consequence that the man has not raped her. So we must reject the claim that this is a case of illocutionary disablement. What has happened in this case is that her speech act failed to have the perlocutionary effect the woman aimed at. It is a case of perlocutionary silencing.

Hornsby and Langton convincingly respond to this criticism. Jacobson assumes that refusal is a necessary condition for rape. But this is based on a confusion. It is true that uptake is necessary for refusal. If the man does not take the woman to refuse, then there is no illocutionary act of refusal. But the fact that the man does not take her as refusing is not a sufficient condition for consent. Just because the woman did not refuse does not imply that she consented. Jacobson 'conflates a condition necessary for refusal with a condition sufficient for consent.' (p. 83) There is a small worry here. Although I agree that the man taking her as accepting sex is not sufficient for consent, I am not sure if this is the way people usually think about rape. It seems that, according to Langton and Hornsby, the man should make sure that the woman indeed consented to sex (and this might be easily achieved, for example, by asking). It is not enough if he only takes her as not refusing. Another condition has to be met: she must also consent. But rape law does not always recognise this. Nonetheless, it should.

The second criticism I want to address is Judith Butler's one which is presented and discussed in 'Pornography's Divine command? Response to Judith Butler.' I focus on this because I think it incorporates one of the main worries of many philosophers who have criticized Langton's account.

Butler takes Langton to believe that pornography has the power of a 'divine command.' But, she argues, this is false for the following reasons:

1. Pornography usually presents its norms as impossible to realize.
2. Pornographic speech can be also silenced: by feminists, by the women who are affected by it through 'rebellious acts of parody.' (p. 111) We have to engage in a 'subversive deconstruction' of the pornographers' discourse.

I think Langton convincingly replies to both of the criticisms. She rejects (1) by saying that we can better understand pornography's

perlocutionary effects by assuming that pornography presents its norms as possible. It is difficult to explain otherwise the fact that consumers of pornography tend to change their normative beliefs about women: they are more likely to view them as inferior and also more likely to accept rape myths.

Against (2) she argues that her theory is compatible with sometimes being able to silence pornography. But this does not imply that in certain contexts pornography does not silence women. And when this is the case, in those contexts, it is irrelevant that there are other contexts in which pornography is silenced. The fact that pornography is silenced in some contexts does not help the people that live under its authority in other contexts: 'how does it affect those men who want their sex lives, and their partners, to resemble ever more closely what pornography offers them?' (p. 115) But I think this claim weakens MacKinnon's claim that pornography in general silences and subordinates women. Langton seems to agree that pornography might do this only in certain contexts, when the audience is in the jurisdiction of its authority.

III. According to MacKinnon, if women are subordinated and silenced by pornography, they are also objectified. Women are 'dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities.' Also, 'pornography makes women into objects' and 'objects do not speak' (MacKinnon, 182). In 'Autonomy-Denial in Objectification' Langton offers an account of sexual objectification that modifies and expands Nussbaum's account. She will also tell us how this connects to the discussion of pornography.

In order to objectify, pornography should deny women's autonomy (this is 'at the core of objectification,' according to Nussbaum). There is room then for pornography that might affirm women's autonomy, so there is room for pornography which does not objectify women but which is liberating to women. Langton interestingly argues that paradoxically some pornography that seems to affirm women's autonomy actually denies it: 'objectification sometimes *depends* on affirmation of autonomy.' (225) She will argue that we can see this if we analyze the concept of 'treating as' and pay attention to 'the plurality of ways in which someone can be treated as an object.' (225)

Nussbaum does not offer a definition of objectification, but takes it to be a 'cluster concept' which has seven features, one being central

to objectification (because it is usually implied by some of the others features: 'the ideas of instrumentality, inertness, ownership, and denial of subjectivity each imply the denial of autonomy,' 226). Langton argues that focusing only on the objecthood part, i.e., on the features of treating someone as an object, constitutes only half of the task. We have to also focus on what we mean by 'treating.'

Langton argues that 'treating' or autonomy-denial can be an attitude (a belief) or an act. Nussbaum uses 'autonomy denial' to cover both senses. But we should distinguish between *non-attribution of autonomy* (that is a matter of attitude) from *violation of autonomy* (that concerns doing something to someone). One can deny autonomy by failing to attribute autonomy without violating that person's autonomy, and vice versa. One example is taken from Kant's *Groundwork*: when you borrow money from a friend and fail to keep the promise to repay it back you do not suppose that the friend lacks autonomy; what you do is violating your friend's autonomy, but acknowledging that your friend has autonomy. Also, there are some types of rape that violate a person's autonomy without failing to attribute it to the victim. In perlocutionary silencing the perpetrator takes the 'no' as a refusal but, in spite of that or because of that, continues to rape the victim. The rapist recognizes the victim's autonomy (he attributes to her the capacity to choose) and then violates it. He rapes her because he is excited by her saying 'no.' In this case the attribution of autonomy is essential to the violation of autonomy. Langton does not discuss this case, but I think we could say that in the case of the illocutionary silencing what happens is a denial of autonomy *qua* non-attribution. Women's refusal and protest have been silenced so the man fails to attribute the capacity to choose to women. Men fail to attribute to women the capacity to decide if they want to have sex or not. Women cannot refuse sex. The only option they have is to 'accept' sex. Why is this distinction important?

Langton wants to argue that this nicely accounts for some cases of pornography which seem to be liberating to women because they affirm their autonomy, but in fact they deny it. In the film *Deep Throat* Linda Marchiano was obliged to have throat sex under threat with a gun. She was presented as consenting to it and enjoying it because 'autonomy sells.' She could not choose what to do but 'was more saleable if she looked like she could.' (239) The movie was first described as affirming her and women's sexual autonomy. But in reality she was raped and tortured to accept and to pretend that she



enjoyed it. This affirmation of autonomy in the fiction in fact was hiding the denial of autonomy in real life. This is a method of objectification through affirming someone's autonomy. Langton concludes by saying that at least sometimes pornography is objectifying women in this way. This is a dangerous type of objectification because, through its autonomy-affirmation, 'it makes abuse easier, hiding it, and hindering escape.' (240)

The main problem with this argument is that it is not clear if in *Deep Throat* we have a genuine instance of autonomy-affirmation. Langton mentions briefly this problem but she thinks that there can be such instances. But it seems to me that in *Deep Throat* we have a clear case of autonomy-denial in both senses. The attribution of autonomy is a false attribution, as Langton herself acknowledges. Later we find out in her book that it was a false attribution. Thus I think it is doubtful if there is such a pornography (genuinely affirming women's autonomy and, in the same time, denying it). It is nevertheless interesting how a false attribution of autonomy can help to hide autonomy-denial and make abuse easier (according to MacKinnon the film actually legitimated real life autonomy-denials, provoking throat rapes). Moreover, Marchiano had problems in protesting against her abuse. Her book of protest, *Ordeal*, was sold as pornography.

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**Truth and Ontology**, by Trenton Merricks. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 202 pp.

The main thesis of *Truth and Ontology* has been described by previous reviewers as 'the radical conclusion that what is true does not depend on what there is' (J. Schaffer, 'Truth and Fundamentality: On Merrick's Truth and Ontology,' *Philosophical Books*, 49, 4, 2008), and as the 'bold and interesting view ... that we should give up the view that truth depends on being. (So the book could have been called *Truth without Ontology*.)' (B. Caplan, 'Truth and Ontology,' *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*.) I disagree. Unfortunately for those in the mood