DOES SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION MAKE EROTIC LOVE IMPOSSIBLE?

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Abstract:

Theories about the nature of sexual objectification and its relationship to heterosexual erotic love have largely failed to express why objectification is philosophically important, the relationship between gender and objectification and what we can do to get rid of objectification. This is because these theories understand sexual objectification as a morally harmful attitude arising in perception. I use the framework of social ontology to propose that we should also think about objectification as the imposition of the function 'sexual object' on social categories like 'women.' This is 'institutional objectification.' This approach reveals that institutional objectification is philosophically important insofar as it undermines the possibility of ethical erotic love between men and women. It also reveals that we have a moral duty to reform social categories that are subject to institutional objectification. This duty is especially pressing on proponents of heterosexual erotic love. Unfortunately, many feminist strategies fall short of meeting this duty, partially because they involve no direct intervention in the content of our social categories. Thus, I argue that we need to meet the moral duty to social category reformation by allowing for the elaboration of sexual difference. This approach represents the beginnings of a sufficient strategy to make ethical heterosexual erotic love possible.

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Introduction:

On Wednesday mornings, during most weeks of the year, I go for coffee with a group of middle-aged women. Inevitably, and to my constant delight, their conversations steer in the direction of their husbands. “Of course, we do love them”, they say “but they’re just all such idiots.”

I have long been fascinated by why it is that genuine, ethical and fulfilling heterosexual love seems so difficult. This thesis represents an attempt to diagnose what makes heterosexual erotic love go wrong, and figure out how to fix it. Another component of the impetus for this thesis is to offer a new way to understand a series of claims from the history of “Radical” Feminism. I hold that contemporary philosophy can gain a lot from subjecting these claims to rigorous scrutiny and creative reconstruction.

At the outset, it is necessary to clarify an idea that will be frequently returned to. This is the notion of ‘erotic love.’ By this, I mean love that is either realised or expressed through actual sexual activity (defined in its broadest form). I take it that because my focus is on the connection between sexual objectification and love, it makes sense to focus on the form of love that is most closely linked to sex. Of course, this is not to deny that erotic love is often contained within the broader structure of romantic love. As such, many of my arguments also have import as a critique of heterosexual love in general.

One of the most significant claims in this thesis is that, all around us, the character of our love for one another seems to be determined for us by social processes that generate both the relevant

concepts we employ and the desires that we feel. I employ a specific version of social constructionism to make this claim. This is the frame of 'social ontology.' On the basis of this view, I am able to introduce a distinctive understanding of gender categories that influences the direction of my thesis as a whole.

In Chapter One, to establish this claim in the context of heterosexual erotic love, I endorse a novel theory of objectification, and support it by showing that it coheres with 'social ontology' and its notion of institutions. This theory holds that sexual objectification can be productively understood as the imposition of the function 'sexual object' upon women. This is 'institutional objectification.' Institution objectification is conceptually linked to the sort of objectification that we are more familiar with 'perceptual objectification', by a unique relationship of necessity.

In Chapter Two, I argue that institutional objectification inculcates deep problems for heterosexual relationships. These problems are so profound that they frustrate even the bare possibility of ethical heterosexual erotic love. On the basis of the distinct harms of institutional objectification, I construct a duty to reform our social categories and eliminate institutional objectification. I then deal with two strategies that are designed to help us meet that duty. These are the materialist and paternalist strategies, both of which are derived from sets of significant claims in the history of Feminist theory. Employing the lens of social ontology and its notion of institutions helps to offer new interpretations of these theories and understand their flaws. Essentially, I find that both responses are insufficient to meet the duty to social category reformation.

In Chapter Three, I argue that in order to meet the duty to reform our social categories and restore the possibility of ethical heterosexual erotic love, we must pursue the elaboration of sexual difference. The process of elaborating difference reveals the distinct values of 'feminine' subjectivity and enables us to envision a roadmap to 'intersubjectivity.' I conclude this chapter by arguing that only the development of intersubjectivity necessarily involves the reform of our social categories. As such, only this strategy is sufficient to render heterosexual erotic love ethical.

Finally, throughout this thesis, it may appear as though I think that the gender categories 'women' and 'men' represent an exhaustive list of possible gender categories. This is obviously not true. However, in the interests of conceptual clarity, I do not explore the relationships between other genders and objectification. Similarly, it is obvious that heterosexuality does not exhaust the possible avenues for erotic love. But, heterosexual love remains my predominant focus as a paradigm instantiation of an erotic relationship.

Chapter One — What is ‘Sexual Objectification’ and what should it be?

1.1 — Overview:

This chapter makes the claim that we ought to move beyond an understanding of sexual objectification as merely a reductive attitude in perception caused by the overwhelming pull of sexual desires. This claim applies whether we understand those desires as ‘prediscursive’ or contingent upon social facts. It first argues that such attitudes cannot arise as a kind without the structure of gendered hierarchy maintained through the means (among others) of sexual objectification of a different, non-perceptual sort.

This chapter makes that argument by applying the framework of ‘social ontology’ and its notion of institutional objects. Such objects, on account of their relationship to collective human recognition, enable us to see that ‘sexual objectification’ is also the collective and continuing imposition of a status function on social institutions like gender categories. In the paradigm cases I will deal with, that category is ‘women.’ I will refer to this phenomenon as ‘Institutional Objectification.’ Further it will emerge that the two constituent parts of ‘sexual objectification’ relate to one another in the following ways.

Firstly, genuinely sexually objectifying desires and attitudes (which are at the core of what I will call ‘Perceptual Objectification’) cannot arise except where such attitudes reflect the hierarchical relationship between distinct social categories (especially gender categories), understood as objects within institutional reality. This is the view that institutional objectification is the necessary ground of perceptual objectification.

Second, the *ubiquity* of hierarchically graduated social categories in our lives, and the *stringency* of their pull over individual attitudes are such that, if they continue to be maintained, it is difficult to conceive of the possibility of developing individual perceptual attitudes and desires that do not reflect those hierarchies. In the case of gendered objectification, for instance, perceptual objectification is potentially unavoidable in desires that operate between a member of a dominant gender category (as an object in institutional reality (like 'men')) and a member of a subordinated gender category (as an object in institutional reality (like 'women')). This is the view that institutional objectification makes perceptual objectification 'contingently necessary'.

Such is the point raised by Barbara Herman in her treatment of the problem of objectification;

"If we are situated in and partially determined by class, gender, and race (not in the abstract, but by class, gender, and race as-we-know them), we can be engaged in activities that are not morally acceptable, and we may not be able to "make things right" by scrupulous attention to the details of our lives and relationships."[1]

1.2 — Perceptual Objectification:

To begin, we need to clarify the notion of sexual objectification as a perceptual phenomenon. We owe the prevalence of discourse about sexual objectification in our society to an often maligned aspect of our Kantian inheritance. Infamously, Kant voices a view that takes sexual

[1]Barbara Herman, "Could It Be Worth Thinking About Kant on Sex and Marriage?", in *A Mind of One's Own*, ed. Louise Antony. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 54.

objectification as a necessary component of sexual desires that renders all human sexuality morally suspect. In a commonly cited passage he says;

"Taken by itself [sexual love] is a degradation of human nature; for as soon as a person becomes an Object of appetite for another, all motives of moral relationship cease to function, because as an Object of appetite for another a person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such by every one."[2]

To Kant, sexual desire functions to render the human person who is desired 'an object of appetite.' This, in his view, renders ordinary moral motives, like respect for autonomy and dignity, incapable of finding expression in the relationship between he who does the desiring and the person who is desired. This involves objectification of a supposedly pernicious type — instrumentalisation. The other is viewed as a mere tool for the satisfaction of one's desire. The charge is that this causes an exaggerated focus on the body of the objectified person, focused in particular on their sex characteristics.[3] This is significant because the body and the mind are meant to be part of inseparable unity in the human being, "in its togetherness with the self it constitutes the person", and this unity grounds the moral status of the person. Thus, where sexual desire functions either to make us give away our bodies for pleasure, or where it strips us of the capacity to see those we desire beyond their sex, sexual desire is ethically objectionable. Because Kant argues that this phenomenon is unavoidably tethered to sexual desire itself, all sexuality ends up condemned in his model, though he argues that heterosexual, monogamous marriages for

[2] Immanuel Kant, "Moral Philosophy: Collins's Lecture Notes", in *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 155-156.
[3] Kant, *Lectures on Ethics,* 166.

the purpose of reproduction can ameliorate this harm by instituting a mutual and complimentary possession.[4]

Interestingly, Kant's claim involves the view that the position of an individual as the object of another person's sexual desire also has a tarnishing effect on that desired person's capacity to be treated as autonomous by others. He ascribes a transitivity to the phenomenon of being objectified, saying "an Object of appetite for another… becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such by everyone."[5] If this is true, it may be grounds for considering sexual desiring as a particularly harmful type of moral wrong. Overtly sexually desiring another human being involves engaging in the harm of objectification, which you are solely and directly responsible for, as well as the indirect harms of that person's continued objectification.

In essence, the Kantian theory of objectification treats objectification as an attitude in perception wherein one treats something that is not an object as relevantly like an object in some sense and therefore fails to respect their genuine moral status. But, it is also an attitude that has an inexplicable property of transitivity.

There's a curious ring of Kant's transitivity notion at play in the work of feminists like Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. Consider the argument from MacKinnon that pornography, whose lingua franca is said to be sexual objectification, inculcates a 'pornographic sexuality' in all of us who watch it.[6] Here, the claim is that because porn is an artefact of objectification that

[4] Kant, *Lectures on Ethics,* 159.
[5] Kant, *Lectures on Ethics,* 156.
[6] Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 199.

generates desires in its viewers, it transfers its objectifying and misleading representations of women into the content of our perceptual attitudes.[7]

There's a different notion of transitivity alive in Dowrkin's treatment of objectification. There, the objectification of women in the sexual act depends firstly upon a self-objectification that reduces her to 'thing' status. This act communicates (transfers) her status to her partner, who receptively and exactly objectifies her in return. She states;

"In becoming an object so that he can objectify her so that he can fuck her, she begins a political collaboration with his dominance; and then when he enters her, he confirms for himself and for her what she is: that she is something, not someone; certainly not someone equal."[8]

But, if it is true that objectification is merely an attitude in individual perception, it seems unclear how any individual's perceptions can directly and exactly transfer from one individual to another, even if that attitude is raised to the level of representation in an artefact. Certainly, it seems plausible to hold that the objectifying attitudes of others might influence my desires and orient my actions. But to prescribe exact transitivity to objectifying attitudes seems to make implausible demands on our capacity to communicate the content of our attitudes and sacrifice our capacities to resist the claims made on our perception by other people's attitudes. On the first point, it is doubtful whether just objectifying another person (even through actual sexual possession) is sufficient to communicate the content of one's attitude (e.g. 'This individual is for sexual use') to others. On the second issue, Kant certainly falls into the suggestion that wherever

[7] MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State,* 199-200.
[8] Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, (London: Arrow Books, 1987), 140-141.

other's attitudes lead my desires, I must go. This imputes outlandishly strong weight to both the attitudes of those others and to desire itself.

Dworkin and MacKinnon appear to me to be closer to the truth. In their views, the transitivity of sexually objectifying perceptual attitudes occurs, not because desires are so uniquely strong that they overpower our capacity to resist, but because those attitudes correspond to certain well-known features of an unequal social reality. The objectifying attitudes of others have pull because they are exactly what we already expect and desire to see or hear.

Whilst the dominant treatment of both author's claims about objectification in analytic philosophy has often held that the fundamental tenet of the Dworkin-Mackinnon account of sexual objectification is Kantian, I hold that it should be regarded as social constructionist.[9]

Certainly it is true that aspects of the Kantian view of sexual objectification are at work in *Intercourse*. Such a view is reflected in Dworkin's deployment of the concept of 'integrity', where heterosexual sex threatens the unity of self-consciousness, bodily autonomy and psychological 'good faith' of both the men and the women who engage in it.[10]

However, there are two important respects in which Dworkin's picture diverges from Kant's account. Whilst Kant argues that this sort of pernicious objectification necessarily inheres in all sexual desire, Dworkin can conceive of a sexuality composed of "deep, humane dreams that

[9] See, for example, Martha Craven Nussbaum, "Sex" in *Sex and Social Justice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 218 and Barbara Herman, "Could It Be Worth Thinking About Kant on Sex and Marriage?", in *A Mind of One's Own*, ed. Louise Antony. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 61-62.
[10] See Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, (London: Arrow Books, 1987), 11-19 and Cindy Jenefsky and Ann Russo, *Without Apology: Andrea Dworkin's Art And Politics* (Routledge: New York, 1998), 101-108.

repudiate the rapist as the final arbiter of reality" which represents an "underground resistance to both inferiority and brutality, visions that sustain life and further endurance."[11] A world then, where such objectification no longer obtains.

She can conceive of this form of sexuality on account of the second substantive difference between her view and Kant's. This is the view that sexual objectification belongs to sexual activity, not naturally, but as the outcome of a historical and cultural lineage of male supremacy that defines what it means to be a woman as inclusive of being a sexual object.[12] Within that lineage, sexual objectification, materialised through the sexual act, is not merely an effect of male dominance, it is at least in part constitutive of that dominance. Fucking, where it involves objectification, is the imposition of womanhood (understood as being a thing for male use) on the woman herself according to Dworkin.[13]

MacKinnon's treatment of the relationship between the gender category 'woman' and the experience of sexuality makes a strikingly similar claim.

"What women learn in order to "have sex," in order to "become women" —woman as gender— comes through the experience of, and is a condition for, "having sex"— woman as sexual object for man, the use of women's sexuality by men."[14]

[11] Dworkin, *Intercourse,* 152.
[12] Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 18-20.
[13] Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 18, 79.
[14] Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 111.

Here, the experience of sex, understood as heterosexual penetration, is both the ground for being a woman and an effect of participating in being a sexual object. The result is substantially confusing. How can it be that a woman's participation in the sexual act and in sexual objectification generates her womanhood as an effect? After all, wasn't her being a woman the exact fact that marked her for objectifying treatment in the first place? This can only be resolved if we understand that being a sexual object has always, already been part of what it means to be a woman in the first place. If this is so, then her objectifying treatment and self-objectification are both grounded in a "fact" about her womanhood and are able to produce an effect confirming her status as a woman.

Therefore, I hold that the existence of the gender category 'woman', understood as being a certain type of sexual object for male use, is the conceptual basis of the pernicious sexually objectifying attitudes women encounter in social life. Ultimately, this means that I argue that what Dworkin and MacKinnon have to offer contemporary philosophy is not an account of objectifying desires, but of objectifying reality.

1.3 — Introducing 'Institutional Objectification':

Therefore, in an effort to make sense of the apparent transitivity phenomenon at work in sexual objectification, I endorse a two-part theory of objectification. It consists of the following.

Objectification is both:

1. Perceptual. The attitude within perception wherein a person is reduced to the object of a person's particular want or desire. This involves treating what is not a thing in a thing-like way.[15]

And;

2. Institutional. The imposition of the status function 'sexual object' on certain institutional objects like 'women' in social reality. This involves delimiting what these objects are for in the social realm.

Considering objectification in this dual sense renders this chapter (in part) an ameliorative project. As Haslanger puts it, the core of the ameliorate project is to shift how we understand something, gesturing towards it in a new light and saying, "this is the phenomenon we need to be thinking about."[16]

The movement from the familiar first constituent part of objectification towards the second is motivated by further concerns. Particularly, it is designed to avoid making objectification a purely psychic phenomenon, reducible to individuated psychological motivations. Situating objectification as both a phenomenon in perception and an aspect of institutional reality allows us to hold that sexual desires (and sexual activity) can be relevantly linked to objectification even in the absence of clearly discernible objectifying motivations on the part of the objectifier, which are necessarily impervious to perfect epistemic access.

[15] Martha Craven Nussbaum, "Sex" in *Sex and Social Justice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 218-219.
[16] Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?", *Noûs* 34, no. 1 (2000): 31–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.0020, 34.

Another way to put this claim is to render it as an analogue to Kate Manne's claims about the nature of misogyny. There, she claims that we can avoid individualising misogyny by "allowing that social practices, institutions, policies, etc., can manifest hostility toward women, as with, for example, a "hostile work environment" or a differentially "chilly" social climate."[17] Similarly, we can avoid the individualisation of 'objectification' by noting that customs, rituals, institutions and policies can manifest an understanding of what it means to be a 'woman', for instance, that takes 'being a sexual object' as a constitutive element. This is reflected in the designations of an objectifying society or a "sexualised" social climate.

It is philosophically important that we can assess the moral dimensions of an individual's experience with these objectifying parts of social reality, irrespective of whether or not we can be certain about the motivations of purported objectifiers. This is so because the objectifying nature of social institutions plays a constitutive part in generating the objectifying perceptual attitudes that agents encounter. That is, an objectifying social reality (for which we bear responsibility) has material effects on the lives of those who are objectified. I take it that MacKinnon makes this very claim when she states "Objectification makes supremacist sexuality a material reality of women's lives, not just a psychological, attitudinal, or ideological one."[18]

Instantiations of the perceptual type of objectification, are both rife in culture and underpin the existing philosophical literature on the topic. Contrastingly, explicit presentations of objectification of the second type are harder to come by.

[17] Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 60-61.
[18] Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 123.

One demonstrative example arises in Leo Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*. It is voiced by Pozdnyshev, a man who murders his wife on account of a species of romantic jealousy grown out of a spiritual distaste at sexuality. For our purposes what matters is Pozdnyshev's recollection of how he came to be introduced to sexuality itself. Long before his experience of adult sexuality, when he "had not yet known any woman", Pozdnyshev recalls that he had been "depraved[…] by other boys."[19] This socialisation into male heterosexuality left an indelible imprint on him psychologically. In particular, it oriented his perception of that class which would emerge as the targets of his adult sexual desires, women. Whilst not yet capable of voicing self-consciously sexual desires, Pozdnyshev recounts that "Already woman, not some particular woman but woman as something to be desired, woman, every woman, woman's nudity, tormented me."[20] The characteristics of this torment help us to clarify the second concept of objectification.

I contend that the second type of objectification arises where a certain function, purpose or use, in this case, the function of being a sexual object, is imposed upon an object (specifically a social category) within institutional reality. Thus, it is relevant that the murderous protagonist of Tolstoy's story does not possess an objectifying attitude towards any actual woman, at least at the time of the memory he recalls. Rather, he recognises that woman herself, the gendered category 'woman' is a thing 'to be desired.' In particular, she is to be desired on account of her 'nudity', because of her association with a supposedly naturally sexed body and a directly connected feminine social role. I argue that Pozdnyshev is making a statement (in particular a status function declaration) about what the gendered category 'woman' is for. But, to go any further

[19] Leo Tolstoy, "The Kreutzer Sonata" in *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy*, ed. Louise and Alymer Maude. (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1924), 366.
[20] Tolstoy, "The Kreutzer Sonata", 366-367.

requires clarification about institutional reality, the 'objects' it employs and the nature of status functions.

1.4 — What is Institutional Reality?:

John Searle provides a mechanism for thinking about the manner in which certain 'things' exist in social reality. This is the frame of 'social ontology.' Its basic insight is that some actually existent entities cannot be explained merely by referring to their intrinsic physical properties and thus depend upon a continued linguistic and social cooperation to exist as entities.[21] As Katherine Jenkins explains;

"That a piece of paper is money, or that a room full of people is a court of law, or that a person is a husband, are facts about these entities. However, unlike some facts, such as the fact that hydrogen atoms have one electron, or that Mount Everest has snow and ice at the top, they are not true simply in virtue of the physical features of the objects in question. Specifically, the examples given above—money, courts of law, and husbands—belong to a particular kind of social reality that Searle calls institutional reality."[22]

Institutional reality arises in the first place because humans (and some other animals) are capable of imposing 'uses' on physical objects. These functions are never intrinsic to the "physics of any phenomenon but are assigned from outside by conscious observers and users."[23] Some imposed uses are 'agentive functions.' These functions track my recognition of an object as *for* a certain

[21] John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality,* (New York: Free Press 1995), 10-14.
[22] Katherine Jenkins, "What Women are For: Pornography and Social Ontology", in *Beyond Speech: Pornography and Analytic Feminist Philosophy,* ed. Mari Mikkola. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 95.
[23] John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality,* (New York: Free Press 1995), 14.

thing, like in the statement 'my chair is for sitting in.' Searle claims that my recognition of an agentive function depends upon a prior collective and intentional form of recognition. This form of recognition, "collective intentionality", is central to the construction of social reality.[24] In the case at hand, it is what enables me to recognise anything at all as a chair. Simply put, I cannot make any sense of a statement like 'my chair is for sitting in' unless a prior and collective form of recognition has already enabled me to see that certain objects, shaped in certain ways *are* chairs.

Thus, we have some concept of the objects of social reality. Clearly, each of these objects is tied to a collectively and intentionally recognised use or purpose (or maybe set of uses or purposes) that are central (ontologically and linguistically) to the concept of that very object.[25] A chair cannot be a chair if it is not physically suited for sitting in, except within highly delimited exceptions (a mediaeval throne exhibited in the Met is no longer for sitting in, but our recognition of the object as a chair depends upon our capacity to recognise that it was clearly designed for that purpose).

But, what of institutional reality and institutional objects? Searle delimits this category to make sense of objects that only possess their specific function within the context of particular human social institutions. In fact, it may be more to the point to say that to Searle, institutional objects only exist at all within the framework of particular human societies.[26]

[24] John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 43, 93.
[25] Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, 60.
[26] See Searle's claim that social institutions are fundamentally linguistic and that the existence of language implies the existence of the social; Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, 109-110.

Drawing on a similar claim made by Jenkins, I argue that we need to understand socially delimited categories such as 'women' as social institutions.[27] A category such as 'women' can be understood variantly by different agents who impose variant agentive functions. The actions of some men, for instance, might lead us to think that the agentive function they assign to their wives is something like "this woman is for domestic labour." Of course, this agentive function is not reducible to any natural facts about any particular woman. There is no sexed fact that makes the female form more adept at washing dishes.

More deeply though, in order to be a woman at all, that individual depends upon a collective and intentional imposition of a status ("womahood") that only obtains in certain contexts.

Pursuing this claim means holding that the gendered category 'woman' is the product of a set of collective intentions sustained by collective recognition. It entails the view that this intention is the necessary ground for these categories, directly rejecting the position that any natural or physical facts are the determinate grounds of gender categories. In doing so, it coheres with the account of gender and race presented by Catherine MacKinnon, who voices scepticism about the commonly touted view that gender is the social meaning of fundamental biological facts. In the preface to *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, she argues that;

[27] Katherine Jenkins, "What Women are For: Pornography and Social Ontology", in *Beyond Speech: Pornography and Analytic Feminist Philosophy,* ed. Mari Mikkola. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 97-98.

"Biology becomes the social meaning of biology within the system of sex inequality much as race becomes ethnicity within a system of racial inequality. Both are social and political in a system that does not rest independently on biological differences in any respect."[28]

To see the difference between the social object 'chair' and the institutional object 'woman', consider the following. In the case of a chair, it is the physical properties (that it accommodates a human backside for instance) which are the *necessary* grounds of my concept 'chair.' Without these determinate properties there is no chance of the concept arising at all.

'Woman' is different. The existence of people genuinely socially recognised as 'women', who may possess all, some or none of the paradigm markers of a female sexed body (secondary sexual characteristics, for instance), but usually not others (e.g. "female" chromosomes), makes it impossible to point to any particular physical quality as the determinate grounds of our gendered category. Of course, gender essentialists will disagree with me here, and point to one or more physical characteristics that they say are constitutive of the category. But, they fail to disagree with me on my terms. After all, where people recognise themselves as women, are recognised by us as women and function as women in the eyes of the state, who are we to say that they fail to meet the criteria of 'womanhood', where womanhood is nothing other than the outcome of that self, social and institutional recognition?

Therefore, 'woman' is an institutional object. This is because the physical properties of any particular woman are related to the concept of 'woman' in a completely contingent sense (people

[28] Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), xiii.

with variant bodies, sex characteristics and senses of gender identity will all count as women, for instance). These physical properties are not the ground of my concept of 'woman.' Only the social recognition that obtains within the highly delimited context of certain societies (relevantly, societies that employ a hierarchical understanding of gender categories) can provide that ground.

The sorts of objects that are constructed upon the basis of a collective and contingent social recognition within certain contexts, are the intentional objects that collectively comprise institutional reality. Entities of this sort fulfil their function because they are granted special status within human institutions. Correspondingly, Searle calls the function upon which an institutional object is constructed a 'status function.'[29]

This status can be articulated through a "counts as" formula. Jenkins provides the following clarifying example about the institutional object of money. "the status function of sterling money can be articulated: <pieces of paper with certain special features and histories [these could be specified, given sufficient space] count as a medium of exchange in the United Kingdom.>"[30] In general, status functions take the form <entities of type X count as Y in context C.>[31]

1.5 — Connecting Institutional Reality and Objectification:

This section presents the claim that because we ought to understand social categorisations like 'women' as institutional objects, we should see 'sexual objectification' as the imposition of the

[29]John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010),, 96-97.
[30] Katherine Jenkins, "What Women are For: Pornography and Social Ontology", in *Beyond Speech: Pornography and Analytic Feminist Philosophy,* ed. Mari Mikkola. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 96.
[31]John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 96-97.

status function ‘sexual object’ on these objects of institutional reality. It makes use of this social category as a paradigm case of institutional sexual objectification that reflects socially recognised hierarchy.

In the following, the relevant status function act is this:

1. <individual people with recognisably feminine traits, dispositions or bodies [e.g. “women”] count as objects for male sexual use (as sexual objects) in societies within a hierarchical gendered system [where the gender category “women” and its associated traits is socially positioned as subordinate to the gender category “men” and its associated traits.]>

I take it that the term ‘sexual use’ is inclusive of, but not delimited to, the use of women’s bodies for the purposes of generating sexual pleasure and/or psychological instrumentalisation.

I argue that understanding women as institutional objects and objectification as the imposition of a status function on that object has the following advantages over the analogous feminist claims I have already introduced;

1. The first advantage is ontological. The institutional reality framework reveals the manner in which an object created by collective social recognition and co-operation can be said to exist. That is, it reveals both the highly contingent manner according to which those institutions form and how their *deontic* content is maintained.

2. It reveals that though we can affirm, remain indifferent to or resist the content placed upon certain institutional objects within our attitudes, it is only through *representation* that we can transform the content of our institutional objects or give rise to new ones.
3. The final advantage is that it allows us to clarify my claim that institutional objectification represents the necessary conceptual foundation for perceptual objectification.

Much of the first claim, particularly how persistent social recognition and co-operation functions to generate social and institutional objects along contingent lines has already been established. But, I have not yet addressed the deontic content of the institutional object 'woman'. Quite simply, for Searle, institutional objects necessarily have such content. He states that;

"The simplest test for whether a phenomenon or fact is genuinely institutional is to ask, Does its existence imply deontic powers, powers such as those of rights, duties, obligations, requirements, and authorizations?"[32]

The social category woman, as I have outlined it, has such deontic content. The status function described above, which determines what women are *for* in a world of hierarchical gender classes, stipulates that the category woman exists for the sexual use of members of hierarchically dominant gender categories (like men). At the very least, this status function therefore entails a deontic authorisation for men to sexually use women. The persistent and widespread acclimation of this status function in society may also be enough to generate similar "rights" to sexual use for members of dominant gender categories, or even an "obligation" for members of the subordinate

[32] Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, 91.

gender category to permit such sexual use. In the interests of space, I will be content with establishing that one effect of collective and intentionally sustained institutional objectification is the establishment of a deontic authorisation which holds that men are authorised to sexually use women.

Secondly, we can appreciate the importance of intentional and collective representation in changing institutional reality by reflecting upon how status functions work. Representation is fundamental to the structure of the status function. There, a determinate X quality (composed of physical facts) is socially *represented* as a Y (an object with significance beyond those physical facts) according to a set of specific contextual stipulations (the C quality.) "It [a status function declaration] makes something the case by representing it as being the case[...]", says Searle.[33] Agreement to or co-operation with this representation is what enables institutional facts to operate smoothly in everyday life (that the shopkeeper accepts that the tap of my credit card on the card reader *represents* a sufficient payment for goods or services in the right context enables me to pay for my groceries). Thus, social movements can transform existing social entities, or give rise to entirely new ones through collectively and intentionally generating new representations.

Searle makes a point fundamentally similar to this when he argues that within social movements, "collective intentionality…" like the generation of "class consciousness[...] or consciousness raising among women,[...]" makes the class of people generating the new representation both "feel empowered" and "empower[s] the group." This is "because the entire structure of the

[33] Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, 97.

existing society rests on collective intentionality. Thus, "its destruction can be attained by creating an alternative and inconsistent form of collective intentionality."[34]

Finally, it is worth clarifying my earlier claim that institutional objectification is the foundation of perceptual objectification in light of the application of social ontology.

In particular, this can now be understood as the claim that every perceptually objectifying attitude (between a member of a dominant social category and a member of a disempowered social category within a hierarchical system) is possible only because it involves the acceptance of institutional objectification. To illustrate this claim clearly, consider that in order for any man to hold a perceptual attitude wherein any particular woman is taken as an object for sexual use (*as a woman*) he must also consider the gender category 'woman' inclusive of that use, or at least amenable to it. The same is true of every institutional object. In order for an agent to rationally and explicitly understand any object as for a particular use, she must perceive that said object can or even ought to be used in that fashion.[35]

Thus perceptual objectification emerges as *necessarily* linked to institutional objectification. It even appears as though perceptual objectification is the means to achieve the end prescribed by institutional objectification; men's sexual use of women. Another way of getting at this is to think that perceptual objectification is a way to enliven man's deontic authorisation to sexually use women.

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[34] Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, 166.
[35] See Jenkins' example of the screwdriver; Katherine Jenkins, "What Women are For: Pornography and Social Ontology", in *Beyond Speech: Pornography and Analytic Feminist Philosophy,* ed. Mari Mikkola. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 96.

Importantly, this means the social process of perceptual objectification seems to be included in and determined by institutional objectification. Perceptual objectification is an institutional fact that stems from a broader institutional structure. If Searle is right about how institutions like this function, then we "do not need a separate attitude of recognition or acceptance for institutional facts within a pre-existing institutional structure."[36] Thus, perceptual objectification can arise in some sense 'against our will', without our explicit recognition, merely because we recognise the broader structure which includes it. This claim is an important foundation of my next argument.

1.6 — A Hypothesis for the 'Contingent Necessity' of Perceptual Objectification:

In the final section of this chapter, I posit that institutional objectification makes perceptual objectification inevitable in erotic relationships between members of hierarchically differentiated social categories, where one category is subject to institutional objectification. Of course, the paradigm instance of a case like this is love between men and women.

This claim is only necessary according to the highly contingent manner in which our society is currently organised. Thus, perceptual objectification arises as 'contingently necessary.'

This argument involves the claims that our social categories are ubiquitous and exercise a stringent pull on our perceptual states.

[36] John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 102-103.

The ubiquity of our institutions can be expressed through deference to the social ontology framework. For instance, in erotic love relationships between individual *men* and individual *women*, the claim is that the institutions of "men" and "women" are always present so long as the participants in that relationship continue to recognise one another as men and women and co-operate as such. This is because the institution is the ground of their capacity to recognise one another as men and women in the first place.

The second claim, which holds that the stringency of the demands that the institutions we recognise make over our perceptual states are such that institutional objectification makes perceptual objectification inevitable, cannot be fully determined in the available space. To do so would require (at least) the exploration of a theory of consciousness that explains how institutional facts come to bear on our perceptual attitudes. Therefore, I present the following, which draws together the previous section's argument about the 'conceptually necessary' link between perceptual and institutional objectification and the preceding claim about institutional ubiquity, as a hypothesis;

If: (1) perceptual objectification is necessarily grounded in institutional objectification as a fact within that broader institutional structure, and (2) institutional facts can arise and be determined within structures we currently recognise without necessitating a separate attitude of recognition, and (3) institutional objectification determines the content of social categories like 'woman' and (4) all erotic relationships between men and women necessarily involve the function of institutions like 'woman.'

Then: We have persuasive reasons to think that institutional objectification makes perceptual objectification contingently necessary in erotic love relationships between men and women.

Because necessity is (conceptually speaking) a very high bar to clear, it is important that this hypothesis must remain hypothetical. However, I take it that this chapter has provided some compelling claims to establish the plausibility of the claim.

Ultimately, if this claim is true then it has the important consequence that much of our current Feminist hand-wringing about perceptual objectification is overblown. Perceptual objectification now appears as the symptom of a structure that ought to be the genuine focus of our theoretical investigation, institutional objectification. In Chapter two, I take this observation of how perceptual objectification in erotic love between men and women is necessarily linked to the structure of this institutional objectification to argue that no amount of scrupulous attention to our perceptual attitudes is enough to cure the injustices of our unequal social categories. Such injustices represent a deep problem for those who participate in heterosexual erotic love relationships. Thus, I develop a strategy to reform these categories that is broader than merely reforming the content of our desiring perceptual states.

Chapter Two: Attempting to Fix the Harms of Institutional Objectification

2.1 — Overview:

This chapter argues that the existence of institutional objectification is incompatible with genuine erotic love.

Therefore, in order to rectify institutional objectification, I construct a moral duty to reform our institutions. This duty is especially pressing on those who participate in 'erotic love' relationships between hierarchically defined social categories, like 'men' and 'women.' I hold that this demand stems from the moral harms of institutional objectification.

Many distinct strands of Feminist thought have recognised that the duty to reform our understanding of the category of "women" is essential. However, few have actually provided adequate tools to accomplish this end. In particular, I argue that the dominant "Materialist Response" to the issue of hierarchically defined gender roles is to transform the conditions of women's material reality until a corresponding psychological transformation occurs, entailing the reform of what it means to be a 'woman.' This strategy is sometimes formulated with the explicit desire of reforming gendered categories to render heterosexual love ethical. According to two proponents of this view, Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone, this is meant to occur by re-orienting material reality and transforming what it means to be a woman until heterosexual erotic love is able to meet the 'equality condition', whose broad features they agree upon.

I critique this strategy by arguing that improving the lives of women in a material way does not reform what it means to be a woman, as delimited in institutional reality. This is because the object 'woman' in institutional reality was not founded upon any determinate material or physical facts, and thus the transformation of those facts does not impede the existence of that category.

I then turn to the second Feminist strategy that I take to be relevant, the "Feminist Paternalist Response." This is not a strategy designed to reform gender categories in an effort to rehabilitate heterosexuality. It is rather an effort to provoke an egalitarian adjustment of the content of our gendered categories like "women" through soliciting a particular form of recognition from the state, in particular through instituting a functional prohibition on popular and harmful representations. This, I argue, is how we should understand the goal of the infamous 'Dworkin-MacKinnon Anti-Pornography Ordinance.' On its face, this response seems to have more value than that offered by the materialist as it consciously aims at inducing a form of recognition that is no doubt important to how an object functions in institutional reality.

However, I voice two concerns which are sufficient for me to move beyond this strategy. These concerns relate to;

1. The relationship between objectifying representations prohibited by the state and the position of the objectifying status function in institutional reality;
2. The relationship between the form of recognition offered by the state and broader social recognition.

The ultimate failure of the paternalist response turns on the fact that it mistakes state recognition as constitutive of social recognition, when we ought to think of it the other way around.

2.2 — Institutional Objectification Makes Heterosexual Erotic Love Impossible:

In this section, I develop reasons for thinking that institutional objectification is incompatible with erotic love. These reasons are outside of my hypothesis that institutional objectification (contingently) necessarily leads to perceptual objectification. Additionally, these arguments prove that institutional objectification harms women, and (to a lesser degree) men.

Institutional objectification is incompatible with genuine erotic love because 1) it undermines the equality that ought to be present in erotic love relationships, 2) it precludes the possibility of genuine recognition between the participants in such relationships and 3) it places unjust burdens upon a genuine need to be loved that are liable to lead to other pernicious forms of objectification. I find support for each of these claims in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone.

It seems reasonable to propose that some degree of equality is an essential component of erotic love. Equality is often claimed as a feature that can make other desirable aspects of erotic relationships, like respect for mutual pleasure, possible. Beauvoir makes this claim by holding that the inequality between men and women makes women use sex between them as a tool for either her own self-objectification or, parroting men, as a tool for her own pleasure. In both instances she is incapable of experiencing mutual pleasure.[37] Of course, equality need not be

[37] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 727.

absolute. Beauvoir argues that "those who make much of 'equality in difference' could not with good grace refuse to grant me the possible existence of differences in equality."[38] In particular, it seems that our conception of equality within erotic love should differentiate between the distinct ways that people experience sexual pleasure according to the configurations of their bodies.

Institutional objectification is incompatible with the maintenance of equality within erotic love. This is because it defines women as *for* men's sexual use. Thus, it subordinates what women are for to men's purposes. In doing so, it subordinates women.

Firestone can be understood as detailing the consequences of this form of inequality. She holds that the hierarchical relationship between "men" and "women" means that in loving any particular woman, the man is essentially "reaching down" from the heights of his gender-class power to a lower, disempowered class.[39] This situation is intolerable to both men and women. To men this is denigratory and to women it is paternalistic. Thus, we construct the culture of love and romance to make male object-choice tolerable. Importantly, such an object-choice is always made on men's terms, in light of his purposes.[40]

The second relevant claim is that institutional objectification means that men and women cannot properly recognise each other in the context of erotic love. Recognition, which I argue involves the capacity to see another for the totality of who and what they really are, is a core value of

[38] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex, 740.*
[39] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979)*,* 132.
[40] Firestone, *The Dialectic Of Sex,* 141.

erotic love. Without it, it is difficult to conceive of how lovers can understand each other as autonomous, sensuous and desiring.[41]

Institutional objectification hampers the capacity of both men and women to offer each other genuine recognition. It delimits that men cannot recognise women as the sorts of beings who deserve input into, or control over, their function. It also delimits that women cannot recognise men except as the sorts of beings that are empowered to determine their function.

Firestone's analysis of the structure of love coheres with my first claim. She identifies that the process of heterosexual love involves the man constructing an artificial and ideal role just beneath his own place in a hierarchical social system. This place is for one particular woman (who is *surely* not like the other girls) to fill.[42] Within this role he determines her function and offers her recognition according to her capacity to live up to that function. In effect, she has no say in the content of this construct.[43] He refuses to recognise her as the sort of being that possesses or deserves that right. In the end, Firestone claims, the woman realises that the content of man's ideal role has more to do with his desires than any positive features attributable to her.[44]

In a complimentary fashion, Beauvoir argues that the woman in love recognises her male lover not only as the sort of subject capable of determining what she is for, but the sort of subject who determines the purposes and meanings of all of the social world.[45] According to her claims, from

[41] Finn Bowring, *Erotic Love in Sociology, Philosophy and Literature: From Romanticism to Rationality*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), 1.
[42] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 132, 141.
[43] "She has been bought to fill an empty space in his life; but her life is nothing." Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* 141-142.
[44] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* 141-142.
[45] "Her salvation depends upon this despotic free being who has made her and can instantly destroy her." Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 678.

the vantage of the materially, legally and psychologically restricted world of the woman, man appears as a "sovereign subject", capable of absolute freedom and well versed in the mysteries of male power.[46] Women, it is claimed, often find it easier to submit to the lure of male eroticism, objectify themselves and allow their male lover unfettered access to power over them than to face the reality of their freedom. Thus, in recognising men as sovereigns, they give them the power of rulers. In doing so, they fail to recognise man as he truly is; ordinary, subject to restriction and wielding powers he does not deserve.[47]

Finally, institutional objectification weighs down the justifiable demand for erotic love in ways that are liable to lead to other forms of objectification. It is reasonable to demand that each of us deserves an equal opportunity to experience the values of erotic love. Such love should be mutually enriching and affirming of the self. Institutional objectification means that women's justifiable demand for the opportunity to develop erotic love relationships is not fulfilled. This seems to threaten the possibility of men experiencing erotic love too, by threatening its mutuality. Further, the inequality expressed in institutional objectification encourages men and women to instrumentalise one another for psychological purposes.

We have already seen that for Firestone, men's capacity to determine women's function allows them to construct an ideal role for their female object-choice to fulfil. All that remains is to show that such a role involves instrumentalisation. We can do so by identifying her argument, adopted from psychoanalysis, that men construct the ideal role of their object-choice from the material of

[46] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 726.
[47] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 665.

their unfulfilled and unattainable ego ideal.[48] As such, institutional inequality enables men to use women to attain psychological ends they could not reach on their own.

Correspondingly, Beauvoir identifies that in treating her male lover as a 'demi-God' woman is using him to obtain a sort of vicarious recognition that she cannot get on her own.[49] This form of instrumentalisation is liable to turn to resentment. Such resentment arises because women will never find true fulfilment riding the coat-tails of men, especially where the freedom of men, bought at the expense of the restriction of women, is wholly unjustifiable.[50]

Cumulatively, I take it that these factors reveal that institutional objectification undermines the possibility of developing genuine heterosexual erotic love completely. This must be the case until such a time as institutional objectification, and its associated harms are removed from the content of our social categories.

2.3 — Establishing a Moral Duty to Social Category Reformation:

Institutional objectification is sustained in the continued recognition of the social category 'women.' The following is a simple argument to establish a moral duty to social category reformation where said social categories are institutional objects subject to institutional objectification. In this particular form of the argument, the relevant institutional object is the social category 'women.'

[48] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 132-133.
[49] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 668-669.
[50] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 670.

P1: Institutional objectification represents ‘women’ as objects for male sexual use. This is a representation of the function of women.

P2: The imposition of this function harms women.

P3: The harm of institutional objectification is sustained by collective recognition of and cooperation with the institution 'women.’

P4: There exists a general moral duty to refrain from doing harm.

Conclusion: There exists a moral duty to reform the social category and institutional object ‘women’ so that it is no longer subject to institutional objectification.

Premises one and three have been established by the earlier discussion of the social ontology frame. Premise two was established in the preceding section. Premise four will be taken for granted as a duty that arises in the instance that moral duties exist at all.

There is one aspect of the argument to clarify before proceeding. The conclusion of the argument holds that the existence of a general moral duty to avoid harm necessarily implies the positive duty to engage in the reformation of our social categories. But, it might be more clear, on the basis of premise three, to argue that the duty proven by the argument is best positioned as a duty to refrain from the recognition of and co-operation with the relevant category. Importantly, this is not an objection, but precisely the point. Within the social ontology framework, refusing to recognise or co-operate with the framework of the relevant institution constitutes a reformation

of that institution. Simply, if there is a sufficient social refusal to offer an aspect of any institution recognition, the relevant institution cannot survive in the same form.[51]

2.4 — The Materialist Response: Reaching the Equality Condition:

This section holds that the materialist feminist seeks to meet the duty to social category reformation through transforming the social context that governs the recognition of 'women'. De Beauvoir and Firestone conceive of this duty because they believe its fulfilment is the only way to render possible ethical heterosexual love. Their approach to the fulfilment of the duty can be summed up in the materialist thesis; 'only a transformation of the material conditions of women's existence is sufficient to enable the psychological transformation of both men and women that is needed to make heterosexual erotic love equal.'

The materialist thesis is endorsed particularly strongly by Beauvoir, who sees the "inner metamorphosis" of women as an inevitable consequence of the material, legal and social equality of "the sexes."[52] Therefore, to rescue heterosexual erotic love, we must pursue the reorganisation of society so that it conforms to the equality condition. Such a condition will also inculcate equality within actual heterosexual erotic relationships. Beauvoir voices one treatment of that condition for loving relationships in the following;

"Genuine love ought to be founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties; the lovers would then experience themselves both as self and other: neither would give up transcendence, neither

[51] John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 166.
[52] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 738.

would be mutilated; together they would manifest values and aims in the world. For the one and the other, love would be revelation of self by the gift of self and enrichment of the world."[53]

Thus, Beauvoir sees equality of liberty as fundamental to genuine love. Such love must avoid the mutilating harms of being consigned to the position of the 'other', a prominent effect of perceptual objectification. Importantly, she understands liberty as both material (the grounds for action) and psychological (a liberty must come to understand itself as transcendent, rather than ensconced by facticity).[54]

We can be certain that this equality condition pertains to erotic love in particular, because to Beauvoir, love realised through actual sexual activity, is that which makes the fantasy of love real. She states "love at a distance[...] is only a fantasy, not a real experience. The desire for love becomes a passionate love only when it is carnally realised."[55]

Similarly, Shulamith Firestone's analysis of the function of gender hierarchy within the purportedly loving relationship also embraces an equality condition as a minimum threshold for genuine erotic love. Although, her version of equality is not framed as between liberties, but between egos. She holds that "Love between two equals would be an enrichment, each enlarging himself through the other"[56]

[53] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 677.
[54] Nancy Bauer, "Beauvoir on the Allure of Self-Objectification" in *Feminist Metaphysics : Explorations in the Ontology of Sex, Gender and the Self*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 126.
[55] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 654.
[56] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 128.

Firestone argues that the first step towards reaching this equality is to acknowledge that the failures of our relationships, though they belong to us, are not our fault. Rather, they are the fault of institutional actors (by which she means at least gender-class hierarchy and capitalism) that have erased the traces of their influence over our private lives. The "privatisation process", intrinsic to the working of our institutions, she writes "functions to keep people blaming themselves, rather than the institution, for its failure. Though the institution consistently proves itself unsatisfactory, even rotten, it encourages them to believe that somehow their own case will be different."[57] Unveiling the operation of these institutions, which extend even to within our own heads, allows us to see all the way down to the origin of our current hierarchical gender system.

She argues this system is founded on the role that "women" play in gestation and childbirth. Whilst there are obvious physical and material facts that are relevant to this role (the fact that many women possess a womb, for instance), these facts are insufficient to explain the social content of her child-bearing role, which also includes "facts" about her nature as a member of a more 'nurturing' or 'caring' sex.[58] Therefore, other material facts are involved in the construction of this function. Firestone's analysis of these material facts is polemical and vague.[59] However, we can supplement her view with recourse to another materialist feminist, Mariarosa Dalla Costa. To Dalla Costa, the most salient of these facts is the tethering of women to the home and to monotonous domestic duties within the frame of the nuclear family.[60] The characteristic actions of women in this situation, which amount to little more to "using the same broom in the

[57] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* 224.
[58] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* 219.
[59] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* 238.
[60] Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Women and the Subversion of the Community,* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), 26.

same square feet of the kitchen in isolation for centuries"[61] are liable to produce a monotonous and restricted inner world. Such an atrophied psychic life forces women to embrace their role as nurturers and caregivers as these roles represent the only socially delimited ways for them to gain male recognition. It also restricts the expression of their sexuality to reproductive acts within the family structure.[62] Therefore, to some materialist conceptions, the reformation of our social categories extends to challenging the 'natural' status of women's reproductive role.

Firestone is more clear about the manner in which technological change is liable to affect the child-bearing role. Her hypothesis is that the development of artificial reproductive technologies has the potential to undermine even the link between the physical facts of women's sexed bodies and their role in reproduction.[63] Here, her basic claim is that if no woman has to undergo gestation, then the representations of the category 'women' as *for* a biological or social reproductive purpose can no longer be founded on any clear material facts.

From the vantage of a clearer elaboration of how non-natural material facts tie women to a reproductive sexual function, it is easier to see why Firestone argues that her project of materialist transformation necessitates the dismantling of the family, the adoption of technologically assisted reproduction and the liberation of sexual desire from the regulation of the family structure. She argues that only these steps will be sufficient to make the two egos involved in heterosexual erotic love equally and reciprocally capable of the "the final opening up to [...] the other" that is central to genuine love.[64]

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[61] Dalla Costa, *Women and the Subversion of the Community,* 26.
[62] Dalla Costa, *Women and the Subversion of the Community,* 36
[63] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 238-240.
[64] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* 128.

Both thinkers invite us to envision the figure of a young girl coming to consciousness in their respective societies.[65] In a world of material equality, why should she see her male love object as a demi-God? Why should she consent to the process of male hallucination that judges her on an ideal scale? Moreover, it seems that there would no longer be any need from men to consider themselves 'sovereign subjects', or to hallucinate the features of their female object-choice.

2.5 — Against the Materialist Response:

However, the core problem with the materialist strategy is that it is not sufficient for changing what 'women' are for in the realm of institutional facts.

The materialist response attempts to provoke an adjustment of the social powers and functions of womanhood through changing the material conditions within which the social recognition of women occurs. Placing this strategy in the form of a status function act helps to show why this approach is insufficient.

The structure of the status function act is contained in the 'counts as' formula; "<X counts as Y in context C.>[66] The materialist is attempting to change the context within which the function of 'sexual object' is imposed (they attempt to change the C term of the status function act). In particular, they desire for that C term to be inclusive of a context of material equality. If our context is inclusive of material equality between men and women, the argument goes, then it

[65] E.g. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* 237-238 and Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 734-735.
[66] John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 96-97.

becomes illogical to suppose that the imposition of a function like being a sexual object upon women could be met with recognition or co-operation. Further, some of the reforms outlined by materialists like Firestone are designed not merely to provoke an adjustment of the act's C term, but also of its X term. This term describes the physical and material properties of an existent thing.

Firestone argues that where women's "biological" function in reproduction is removed from the X term, the representation of women as objects for male sexual use in the act's Y term is made substantially more difficult. There may no longer be, for instance, any apparently natural fact to found that representative act. She holds that there are some contextual developments (C term), like the advent of technologically assisted reproduction, which make this transformation of the X term possible. These contextual facts could undermine the seemingly natural position of claims about women's function in reproduction in the X category of the status function act.

The problem with this view is that material facts, whether or not they are facts contained in the status function's C or X terms, always underdetermine the social powers of our institutions. This is the very point of the social ontology framework.[67] It should be obvious that facts about our context make it easier to generate widespread recognition of institutional objectification. Factors like persistent income inequality between men and women or the unequal division of domestic labour within heterosexual relationships coalesce to make it easier for the institutional fact of women's subordination to find acceptance. But transforming any of these facts, or others like them, does not impede the recognition of women as objects for male sexual use altogether. Though they are relevant to this function and to its maintenance, they do not determine it.

[67] John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality,* (New York: Free Press 1995), 10-14.

Further, it may be the case that Firestone is right to think that some contextual developments actually alter what we think of as the physical or material properties of an existent thing. But, this does not mean that changing our perception of the status function's X term changes the ways we can socially represent that object, its powers, or its functions.

Consider the example of currency. It is common knowledge that during the development of currency, many jurisdictions drew a relationship between the value of the material with which their currency was made and the monetary value of said currency. Therein, a material fact (the actual value of the metals a coin is made from) was clearly relevant to the manner in which the object was represented as having certain social functions and powers. Particularly, it helped to facilitate the recognition of the Y term (that the object in question is money and can be used for the sorts of things we use money for). But, of course, we know that as jurisdictions around the world changed what they made their currency out of and employed less valuable materials, the existence of money as money did not change at all. To respond to Firestone we should think about the institutional object 'woman' in a similar way. There is no doubt that "facts" about 'women's' role in reproduction are persuasively used to generate recognition of her institutionally delimited function. But merely eliminating the social recognition of these "facts" cannot foreclose the possibility of women continuing to be represented as objects for male sexual use. Representations of such sexual use can easily be founded on other social "facts" and can represent 'women' as 'for' other sexual (non-reproductive) uses.

Essentially, the materialist response fails on the grounds of insufficiency.

2.6 — The (Feminist) Paternalist Response: Dworkin and MacKinnon on State Recognition:

So, if reforming the material aspects of our society is insufficient to alter the content of our social institutions on account of the fact they can continue to function on the basis of new material facts, we ought to consider a different approach. I call the precise response outlined here "Feminist Paternalism", because it justifies state intervention in "speech" on the grounds that some speech or representative acts *constitute* a harm to women.[68] Such a response contravenes the liberal's value of free speech.[69] Developing a response to this line of objection is beyond the scope of this thesis.

I hold that Dworkin and MacKinnon can be productively understood as attempting to engage a certain form of state recognition that might serve to reform the content of our gendered categories and ameliorate the harms caused by the unfair prescription of sexual object status to women within institutional reality. They do so via the deeply controversial 'Antipornography Civil-rights Ordinance', a co-drafted legal instrument passed in several cities in the United States during the 1980's and later struck down for impinging freedom of speech.[70]

The relevant form of recognition pursued in the Dworkin-MacKinnon ordinance is clearly negative. It delimits the sort of ways that women ought *not* to be represented through the

[68] Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 131.
[69] Famously, see Ronald Dworkin, "Women and Pornography" in *The New York Review of Books*, (NYR, October 21, 1993).
[70] See *American Booksellers Ass'n, Inc. v. Hudnut*, 771 F.2d 323 (7th Cir. 1985).

artefacts of pornography. In particular, it holds that representations of women as sexual objects whose inviolability, integrity or worth are in question is constitutive of a harm to women's civil rights. The ordinance suborns this recognition from the state by defining pornography as the sort of object which represents those very attitudes;

"Pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words that also includes one or more of the following: (i) women are presented dehumanised as sexual objects, things or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped[…]"[71]

However, in the views of Dworkin and MacKinnon, it would be reductive to hold that all the ordinance achieves is a negative duty to avoid harming women's civil rights through the generation of pornographic objects that serve to strengthen the prescription of a function like 'sexual object' on women. In making it a harm to civil rights to pornographically represent women as sub-persons for male use, they also think that the state may as well be recognising that women are subjects, who possess the qualities of inviolability, integrity and genuine worth.[72] It is this form of tacit, positive recognition that they identify when they hold that "[t]his new law also offers hope: an effective legal tool for making sex equality real."[73]

[71] Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality,* (Minneapolis: Organizing Against Pornography, 1988), 36.
[72] Dworkin and MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights,* 52.
[73] Dworkin and MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights,* 94.

I take it that Dworkin and MacKinnon are right to suggest that state recognition can function in this manner. The adoption of the anti-pornography ordinance is not merely the codification of a potential harm to women's rights caused by objectifying representations. It is also an expression of the state's legitimate interest in raising pornography as a form of objectifying representation over and above other socially practised forms of objectifying representation that the state neither prohibits or endorses. It is thus a potential affirmation of "a legal imperative toward equality[...]"[74] that may serve to undermine that which I have taken as the hierarchical differentiation of gendered categories through status function prescription within institutional reality. Because of this affirmative function, state approval often has important social consequences, especially for those who gain newfound recognition.[75]

2.7 — Against the (Feminist) Paternalist Response:

Unfortunately, the following concerns prevent me from endorsing this approach.

The first issue tracks the relationship between objectifying representations and the existence of the status function 'sexual object' in institutional reality. It can be formulated by asking the following question; is state recognition of the harms of some objectifying representations (which functions akin to a prohibition of those representations) enough to dislodge the objectifying status function entrenched in institutional reality?

[74] Dworkin and MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights,* 22.
[75] Watson makes a similar argument about the function of state recognition in the context of marriage. See Lori Watson, "Plural Marriage and Equality." In *ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF PHILOSOPHY OF SEX AND SEXUALITY*, eds. Brian D. Earp, Clare Chambers, and Lori Watson. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 138.

Answering this question demands that we clarify how a status function is maintained. Searle tells us that though generated by "collective intentionality", the maintenance of the position of status functions hinges only on continued recognition.[76] Such recognition extends all the way from enthusiastic agreement to begrudging acknowledgment or even apathetic indifference.[77] For our purposes, this matters because the relevant status function has been held as so deeply entrenched in institutional reality that it taints the psychological attitudes of even those who disagree with its imposition.

Resultantly, a program like the Dworkin-MacKinnon Ordinance promises too much. Gaining state recognition of the harms of objectifying pornography is likely to make the blatant eroticisation of the imposition of the status function 'sexual object' on women less common and less acceptable. Thus, it undermines enthusiastic social assent to the maintenance of that function. But it cannot "make sex equality real", because it is irrelevant to the other forms of representation that bolster that function.[78] Dworkin herself clearly knows this. Her analysis of the objectifying features of social reality dedicates far more time to the reification of sexual objectification in law, literature and philosophy than in objectifying pornography.[79]

Secondly, and for my purposes determinatively, this approach draws implausible conclusions about the relationship between state recognition and general social recognition, that which is actually necessary to change the content of our collectively delimited institutions. The ultimate

[76] John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 57.
[77] Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, 57.
[78] Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality,* (Minneapolis: Organizing Against Pornography, 1988), 94.
[79] See Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, (London: Arrow Books, 1987), 173-197.

failure of this strategy turns on the fact that it mistakes state recognition as constitutive of social recognition, when we ought to think of it the other way around.

There can be no doubt that state recognition is backed by a coercive power, which Searle labels 'legitimation.' "Legitimation[...]", he writes, "is crucial for the functioning of government because political power requires some degree of acceptance."[80] In this case, we have seen that such state legitimation is achieved through the imposition of a negative duty to avoid harming women's rights through some objectifying representations. But, importantly, "where government is concerned, legitimation by itself is never enough."[81] It is, in particular, not enough to suborn the social recognition that gives laws their law-like status. Thus, the paternalist response is insufficient to achieve the shift in our attitudes and representations that would actually have the potential to change institutional reality.

Further, if MacKinnon is right about the manner in which the process of the social recognition of laws plays out, there are further concerns. She holds that the "authoritative interpretive community that makes law distinctively lawlike" is the embodiment of "distinctively male values."[82] These values are both moral and epistemic. For instance, the dominant interpretative communities who grant recognition to the law have long held that the domain of the "private" buttresses the force of the state in many important ways. Those who insist upon the sanctity of the private sphere as the domain of freedom, hold that such freedom is "sexually neutral." [83]That is, they suggest that this freedom obtains similarly for both men and women. But, as I have held,

[80] John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 163.
[81] Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, 163.
[82] Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 170.
[83] MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State,* 168.

the "private" sphere, especially as it encompassess erotic love, is profoundly shaped by the structural inequity of men and women. Therefore, whilst it might be true that the private sphere appears as a domain of freedom from the male point of view (although Firestone suggests that this freedom is an empty value in light of men's inability to love),[84] it is often the sight of unjust and repetitive objectification for women or worse, the "distinctive sphere of [women's] intimate violation and abuse, neither free nor particularly personal."[85]

I argue that if this example is right, then we have plausible reasons to believe that where the values that are used in social reality to determine the legitimacy of our laws are fundamentally male, soliciting "Feminist" state recognition is a doomed enterprise. This must be the case until such a time as the values that govern the recognition of our laws are either legitimately sexually neutral (a possibility I think is doubtful) or cognisant of the fundamentally different experiences of men and women. This is what I will call "sexual difference". In some ways this label is a misnomer, since it is often taken to imply that sex is a biological reality. I have explicitly rejected that claim. Thus, what I mean when I say that "sexual difference" is important is that 'men' and 'women' have distinct subjectivities that reflect distinct values. These features have been deeply influenced by the contingent organisation of the concepts of "sex" and "gender."

Fundamentally, for Dworkin and MacKinnon, it was insufficient to ask the state to recognise objectifying pornography as a violation of women' rights without also endeavouring to make that claim 'true' in social reality, through elaborating the sorts of moral and epistemic values that stem from the distinct experience of being a 'woman.' These values must be elaborated in a

[84] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex,* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 135.
[85] Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 168.

manner that is conducive to generating new norms for social recognition. For my purposes, this means that we will only meet the duty to social category reformation where we make it true, in the same fashion, amongst ourselves, that women are not sexual objects, not where we ask the state to intervene in prohibiting representations that hold that they are.

Chapter 3 - Toward the End of Objectification:

3.1 — Overview:

At the outset of this chapter, we find ourselves in a conceptual bind. Both the materialist and the paternalist responses to the moral duty to social category reformation have proven insufficient. Broadly, they were unsuccessful because they attempted to intervene in the context within which the recognition of women as objects for sexual use arose, rather than intervene in the attitudes and perceptual states which constituted that recognition in the first place. Particularly, they failed to generate new values or representations which show that what 'women' are for is not reducible to sexual use.

But, even this suggestion presents a puzzle. After all, I have argued that these perceptual states are determined for us by the structure of institutional objectification.[86] How could it then be that these perceptual attitudes, tarnished by the brush of institutional objectification, contain any potential to liberate women from objectification? Answering this question is the key focus of this chapter.

[86] See section 1.6.

I take it that if the reader has been so far convinced of my claims, then they are likely to see two options to move forward and meet the duty to social category reformation. The first is the abolition of the gender category 'women'. The second is the nebulous path just identified, that of finding the potential of our predetermined perceptual states to help us reform the category of 'women.'

I argue that both approaches necessitate an identical and fraught first step. This is the step of elaborating sexual difference.The concept of sexual difference is so important because without it, we cannot elaborate the new values and ideas that will enable us to represent what women are *for* differently. My concept of this difference is influenced by Luce Irigaray, who casts her task in the following terms.

"Man and woman should not be abandoned to a mode of functioning in which woman is hierarchically inferior to man… [T]o positively construct alterity between them is a task for our time."[87]

To conclude this chapter I argue that the elaboration of sexual difference is necessary to meet the duty to social category formation and represents the beginnings of a sufficient response to this duty. Therefore, it should also be considered as the starting point of a project that seeks to ameliorate heterosexual erotic love from the harms of institutional objectification.

[87] Luce Irigaray, *I Love To You:Sketch of a Possible Felicity Within History,* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 62.

3.2 — Assessing Abolition as a Path to Social Category Reformation:

Without first elaborating sexual difference, the abolitionist's task is deeply implausible. Essentially, it amounts to withdrawing all recognition from the category 'women' and refusing to recognise any individual as a 'woman.' Even if this were possible, it is liable to produce some strange results as it is unlikely that we can have heterosexuality without women. To some, this is no issue. But for many readers, like those who are involved in heterosexual erotic love partnerships or who define themselves as 'heterosexual' this is a serious problem. In order to pursue the argument that ethical heterosexuality is possible, I cannot get on board with the abolitionist's project.

Leaving aside that the abolition of the social category 'women' would make heterosexuality a conceptual impossibility, I argue that we cannot meaningfully withdraw recognition from our concept of 'women.' This is because, though founded upon socially delimited facts, the institution of 'women' is indispensable to our language and to our concepts. In effect, we need 'women' to make sense of both difference and oppression, and we cannot think without the concept of women in our current institutional environment.

There are two tools that I use to establish this claim. The first is Irigaray's argument that our use of language proves the 'relational' nature of gender categories, which she argues are not reducible to either social or biological facts.[88] Irigaray views gender categories as relational because they express distinct ways of relating to the world. For example, when men and women are asked to construct simple sentences in language, using the prompt 'I', men are likely to

[88] Luce Irigaray, "Why Cultivate Difference? Toward a Culture of Two Subjects," Paragraph 25, no. 3 (2002), 80.

employ subject-object relationships ("I eat an apple"), whilst women are likely to employ relationships between people ("I ate an apple with Lila.")[89] On its own, this claim does not prove a whole lot more than that gendered socialisation produces distinct modes of subjectivity expressed in language.

But, to the abolitionist, this notion presents a serious problem. The abolitionist is asking us to withdraw our recognition of the category 'women.' If this occurred then many current 'women' would still possess a subjectivity that looks a lot like the sort Irirgaray describes. But, they would now lack the epistemic tools to elucidate the nature of this subjectivity. Withdrawing our social recognition of the category 'women' would not itself eliminate 'women', transform their use of language, or their relationship to the world. Instead, it risks removing a core instrument of their capacity to describe both their difference and their oppression.

John Searle's discussion of the connection between language and institutional reality makes some remarkably similar claims. It is important to recall that for Searle, the generation of our social categories through status function acts express the generative nature of language.[90] The construction of the linguistic concept 'women' is generative of a related deontology and of a structure of recognition and co-operation that secures its maintenance. The generative powers of language mean that some institutional facts involve "standing speech acts."[91] Basically, this entails that where linguistic designations of a social function are so deeply entrenched in the fabric of our lives that they generate even our subjectivity, then it is naive to think that mere

[89] Irigaray, "Why Cultivate Difference", 80.
[90] John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 86.
[91] Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization,* 86.

withdrawal of recognition is sufficient to abolish these acts. Irigaray has provided the basis for holding that the generation of the social category 'woman' is precisely this type of speech act.

With no step towards the elaboration of sexual difference, the abolitionist's claim amounts to little more than an argument that a sort of cultural amnesia, where each of us simply stops thinking and speaking in terms of 'women', is possible. Such a view is strange because it forecloses on the possibility of ethical heterosexuality. Further, it is dangerous because it precludes the possibility of talking about 'women' productively. Finally, it is naive insofar as it thinks that withdrawing our recognition can abolish a set of representative facts entrenched in social reality for millenia.

Such is the point raised by Irigaray in *This Sex Which is Not One*. There, her claim is that there is no liberatory potential in either hiding sexual difference by appropriating women to male subjectivity, or in reversing the current dialectic so that men are the inessential, objectified category and women are the subjects. Within such strategies, "history would repeat itself in the long run" and we "would revert to sameness: to phallocratism. It would leave room neither for women's sexuality, nor for women's imaginary, nor for women's language to take (their) place."[92]

[92] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1985), 33.

3.3 — Elaborating Sexual Difference as Necessary:

So, the abolition of ‘women’ seems a fraught project unless we begin with the elaboration of sexual difference. Now, I will prove that the same is true of the process of reforming our gendered categories.

Here, I make an important supposition. If we hold that elaborating the nature of sexual difference is a necessary part of both reforming our social categories *and/or* abolishing them then we render the process of category reform nearly identical to the process of category abolition. How can this be so? Because, in either approach, the social category ‘women’ as it currently exists, will cease to be. The major difference then, is that on the reform approach, we can one day hope to talk about women but mean something entirely different from what we do now, whereas on the abolitionist approach there would one day be no more women of which to speak. Within both views we ought to be capable of understanding that different people will experience subjectivity differently. It simply will no longer be the case that there is a hierarchically dominant subjectivity for ‘men’ and hierarchically disempowered subjectivity for ‘women.’

The distinction between the approaches is reduced to a difference in our use of the terms ‘women’ or ‘woman.’ I do not think that this distinction matters much, insofar as picking either option is amenable to the same ends. It seems to me that some people will think there is something about the terms ‘women’ and ‘woman’ that make them worth keeping around, even if just to acknowledge how far women have come, or out of deference to our shared history. It also

seems that for others, those same terms will carry too much historical baggage to be useful in an egalitarian world.[93]

However, this does not yet prove that elaborating sexual difference is needed to reform our social institutions or sufficient to actually attain that reform. If my previous claims about institutional objectification are right, then I need to prove these claims in order to establish the possibility of ethical heterosexual love.

I argue that we need to elaborate sexual difference to reform our social categories because we have no other way to meet the duty to social category formation. Of course, I am willing to concede that this claim could be wrong. There may be mechanisms to achieve the reformation of our social categories beyond those I have already explored. One (or more) of them may prove to be sufficient. But, we have now seen that three important feminist strategies, the materialist, the paternalist and the abolitionist are all insufficient to meet the duty. For the last of these responses, this is true only insofar as it ignores sexual difference.

Thus, I will take it for granted that if the elaboration of sexual difference is sufficient to achieve social category reform, then it is also necessary to meet the moral duty I outlined in Chapter Two.

[93] For a verison of this argument see Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?", *Noûs* 34, no. 1 (2000): 31–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.0020, 46.

3.4 —Sexual Difference and the Duty to Social Category Reformation:

What is sexual difference? It is nothing more than a set of acts about the different ways that men and women understand their subjectivities. These facts were determined for us by our institutions, including through the process of institutional objectification. Sexual difference, understood in this sense, is little more than a set of perceptual states that represent subsidiary facts that arise in light of the broader structure of institutional objectification. The existence of perceptual states that qualify as this sort of institutional fact was established in Chapter One.

In particular, sexual difference arises from the distinct ways in which individual men and women experience their relationship to the institutional structure of gender, and its associated process of objectification. Men often experience this process as an affirmation of an innate superiority, though some are uncomfortable with the unjustifiable notion that they ought to both determine what women are for and make use of them as such. Constrastingly, women under this system experience themselves in a contradictory fashion, as both subject and object. This conflict between her existence as a subjectivity and her social recognition as an object has been fundamental to feminist thought since Simone de Beauvoir.[94] In women, it is claimed, the boundaries between subject and object collide and strain.

My minimal conception of what sexual difference is and where it comes from will strike some as strange. After all, elaborating upon this difference is meant to represent the first step towards social category reformation. It is also meant to play a crucial role in making ethical heterosexual erotic love possible. However, if sexual difference is just a set of facts determined for us by

[94] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 678.

social processes outside of our direct control, then it is unclear how those facts can help to end objectification.

Here my argument is that whilst the content of sexual difference is determined by institutional objectification, the ways in which we can use sexual difference are not.

So how can we use sexual difference in a generative way? Drawing on Irigaray, I posit the following uses. Sexual difference can be used to 1) deconstruct the masculine subject as the outcome of a logic of *the same*; 2) elucidate the conditions of the possibility of the genuine emergence of a feminine subject; and 3) create a mode of 'intersubjectivity.'[95] The completion of these stages entails meeting the duty to social category reformation. Thus, this project can be used to render heterosexual erotic love ethical.

Sexual difference shows us that the masculine subject is generated by and makes use of a logic of *the same.* This is so even when the notion of masculine subjectivity generates the conditions for sexual difference.

Relevantly, a logic of *the same* does not mark as genuine the distinction between the self and other. Instead, it employs the categories of the self and the not-self, which Irigaray describes as like the deformed reflection of the self.[96] This logic is important to understand gender subordination. If women were the genuine *other* of men, her claim goes, then it would be

[95] Elizabeth Hirsch, Gary A. Olson, and Gaëton Brulotte, "'Je-Luce Irigaray': A Meeting with Luce Irigaray", *Hypatia* 10, no. 2 (1995): 93–114. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1995.tb01371.x, 96.
[96] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1985),133-134.

possible for them to exact reciprocal demands upon men.[97] So, instead of the other to man, women are simply the 'not-man' who is therefore justified in existing beneath men. This claim helps to explain the foundations of institutional objectification. If Irigaray is right, then the hierarchical definition of our social roles, within which women exercise no reciprocal deontic claims over men, should not be possible within a logic of self and other. So, it is likely that institutional objectification is founded upon a logic of *the same.*

Although the imposition of institutional objectification helps to create sexual difference, it also obscures it. Principally, institutional objectification attempts to naturalise this difference on the basis of perceived "natural" facts. Further, we can see that the logic of *the same* underpins some responses to institutional objectification. In particular, it is clear that the materialist and abolitionist responses risk appropriating feminine subjectivity to the masculine mode. The former of these does so by suggesting that there is only one sort of subjectivity, and that women can attain it through embracing a call to "brotherhood."[98]

Secondly, the elaboration of sexual difference shows us the conditions wherein a genuinely 'feminine' subject can emerge. Like Irigaray, I do not claim to know the nature of this subject.[99] However, I think that reflecting on women's embodied experience of objectification helps to illustrate what these conditions might be. As we have seen, the objectified woman experiences herself as subject and object simultaneously. But, more precisely, she is also capable of

[97] See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1985), 29-33.
[98] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 741.
[99] "The values of feminine subjectivity are still unknown and not yet cultivated." Luce Irigaray, "Why Cultivate Difference? Toward a Culture of Two Subjects," Paragraph 25, no. 3 (2002), 82.

experiencing that though the concepts and desires that have been determined for her within our institutions belong to her, they do not represent her completely.

This means that reflecting upon the lived contradiction of embodied objectification draws attention to the fact that our agency in some sense exceeds the determinations of our social institutions. In particular, women are capable of reflecting upon the situation of their sexual difference to realise that their identity in a masculine system is always partial, illusory and under-determined. Another way of thinking about this is to conceive that there is always something missing in the approach to women taken by the logic of *the same*. In looking at the deformed reflection in the mirror and mistaking it for 'woman', man never sees women for their true potential.

The notion of partial, illusory and under-determined identities is important to Irigaray's speculative conception of the third use of sexual difference, the construction of intersubjectivity. The development of intersubjectivity must be predicated on overcoming the hierarchical differentiation of 'men' and 'women', that reflects a logic of masculine appropriation. It must be permissive of at least two forms of subjectivity that are bridged by partial recognition and a consistent process of re-formation along egalitarian lines.[100] Within the frame of intersubjectivity, we can recognise each other, but never completely. This is in order to prevent the revival of a logic of *the same*. Irigaray says "in order to *love to you,* I must renounce being or becoming identical to you or the same as you and making you mine."[101]

[100] Luce Irigaray, *I Love To You:Sketch of a Possible Felicity Within History,* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 39.
[101] Italics added. Luce Irigaray, "Why Cultivate Difference? Toward a Culture of Two Subjects," Paragraph 25, no. 3 (2002), 84.

Intersubjectivity is the culmination of the process of developing a cultural identification with the nature of sexual difference.The development of intersubjectivity would not merely achieve the reform of our gendered categories by necessitating the development of new ways of recognising one another as ‘women’ or ‘men.’ It would also help us to elucidate new values that can be obtained within erotic love. Rather than possession, for example, intersubjectivity can give us spontaneity and reinvention.

Ultimately though, rather than the structure of institutional objectification, intersubjectivity can give us the hope of ethical heterosexual love. For this reason, I believe that the project of liberating society from institutional sexual objectification must begin with the recognition of sexual difference.

Conclusion:

This thesis began by asking a relatively simple question — what if sexual objectification was more than just a harmful attitude that sometimes arises in perception? To figure out what more we could make of the phenomenon of objectification, I introduced the notion of social ontology.

I argued that if we use that framework to understand women as an institution, then sexual objectification could be understood as the imposition of the function ‘sexual object’ upon that institution. Understanding objectification in this light had serious explanatory advantages as it meant that sexual objectification was no longer merely a psychic phenomenon, reducible to individual motivations. It also meant that we could see our cultural practices, social institutions and attitudes as both reflective of and constitutive of an objectifying reality. Finally, it enabled us

to draw a conceptually necessary relationship between perceptual objectification and the broader institutional structure it depends upon. The appeal of this set of claims was bolstered by the fact that the 'social ontology' frame was not designed to explain either gender or objectification.

Though productive in clarifying the nature of objectification, the view expressed in Chapter One had terrible consequences for the possibility of ethical heterosexual erotic love. Chapter Two was devoted to elucidating the relationship between the harms of institutional objectification and the capacity for men and women to love each other in an ethical fashion. There, it emerged that objectification had made erotic love impossible. In the world of institutional facts, even our attitudes and perceptual capacities are determined for us. Thus, we could not cure heterosexual love by merely eliminating the 'bad' parts of desiring perceptual states.

Further, even if our objectifying attitudes could be eliminated, this would not be sufficient to meet a moral duty introduced in Chapter Two, the duty to social category reformation. This duty is founded upon the distinct harms of objectification. Unfortunately, this duty proved very difficult to meet. Two distinct types of feminist responses, the materialist and the paternalist, both failed to develop a sufficient strategy for re-determining the content of our social institutions. The former failed because it did not appreciate the potential for social categories to continue in the face of the transformation of contextual facts. The latter failed because it mistook state recognition for broader social recognition. Importantly, only social recognition has the potential to reform the content of our institutions. The result was a conceptual bind. Therein, it was decidedly unclear how we could effectively undertake the work to reform our social categories that is necessary to render possible ethical heterosexual love.

Chapter Three was devoted to exploring a new way of meeting the duty to social category transformation. This strategy involved the elaboration of sexual difference. Pursuing it meant exposing masculine logic as a logic of *the same,* prefiguring the possibility of the emergence of a feminine subject, and developing a path toward intersubjectivity. Ultimately, I held that developing intersubjectivity necessarily entails the reformation of our social categories. Further research ought to determine what definite practices are amenable to the emergence of this intersubjectivity.

The exploration of the relationship between sexual difference and intersubjectivity enabled me to claim that through the development of an intersubjective mode, ethical heterosexual erotic love could be determined as a clear possibility. This form of love would be subject to the function of new erotic values that come out of sexual difference. Each of us ought to be cognisant of where such values find expression in our own erotic lives and nurture their capacity to help transform the social world.

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