


ARTICLE

Personification and Objectification

Nils-Hennes Stear 

Department of Philosophy, Uppsala Universitet, Uppsala, Sweden
Email: nstear@umich.edu

(Received 27 July 2019; revised 12 May 2023; accepted 9 June 2023)

Abstract

A handful of scholars have connected objectification (treating people like objects) to personification (treating objects like people). The recurring idea is that personification may entail objectification and therefore share in the latter's ethical difficulties. This idea is defended by various feminist philosophers. They focus on how the connection manifests in the male, heterosexual consumption of pornography, grounding a constitutive ethical criticism of this pornography. In this paper, I schematize the only two arguments for this connection, showing why each fails. I revise one of the arguments to overcome my objection before showing, most significantly, that *any* argument with the same form *must* fail. I conclude by suggesting that thinking about the ethics of the imagination offers a promising alternative approach that preserves the spirit of these failed arguments.

Formal arguments

If *objectification* is, roughly, treating a person as an object, then *personification* is the converse: treating an object as a person. A handful of philosophers have connected the two notions, arguing that personification, specifically of pornography, may entail objectification, thereby warranting ethical criticism. Two arguments attempt to establish this connection. On the first, personifying pornography by treating it “as a woman” harms women by collapsing the distinction between women and objects in a particular way. On the second, personifying pornography requires having objectifying attitudes towards women. In both cases, the basic intuition is that treating mere objects as adequate substitutes for women degrades the boundary between them, whether in reality or in the personifier's mind.¹

A lot has been written on the ethics of pornography. Much of it looks at empirical facts around its manufacture and consumption. One familiar argument is that consuming pornography is ethically flawed because it causes violence and abuse against women and induces acceptance of such.² Another appeals to the way pornography's production often harms or exploits the women involved.³ Arguments connecting personification to objectification differ from these. Just as someone might argue that reading a person's diary without permission is ethically criticizable, regardless of whether doing so leads

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Hypatia, a Nonprofit Corporation. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is unaltered and is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use or in order to create a derivative work.

to harms, so the arguments discussed here aim to establish that pornography is ethically flawed independently of bad effects, whether of manufacture or consumption. They represent a larger tradition of criticizing pornography in ways independent of controversial claims about its empirical harms. The personification-objectification connection's most full-blooded defenses focus on the male, heterosexual consumption of pornography. They argue that such consumption constitutively involves treating pornography as a kind of surrogate woman—that is, personifying it. If they can robustly yoke personification to unethical forms of objectification, therefore, these represent powerful tools in the anti-pornography kit.

That using pornography involves literally treating pieces of paper or, updating matters, computer images as a woman sounds far-fetched. However, since increasingly life-like sex robots and dolls have become widely available commodities in a multibillion-dollar industry (Cox-George and Bewley 2018, 161), this worry is passé. At worst, one can shift the aim of these arguments from pornography to different forms of sexual surrogacy, pornographic or otherwise. Alternatively, the target has simply grown.

Another worry is that an argument drained of any empirical fuel—i.e., concerning pornography's typical contents or effects—cannot get airborne. Of course, being unburdened by the need for empirical claims to come out any particular way lends such arguments a certain agility. If it should turn out that pornography does not in fact cause societal harms, then while arguments propelled by such harms would stall, personification arguments would not. Furthermore, it is reasonable to think that pornography's ethical status is not settled by these empirical facts alone. Another advantage is that personification arguments promise to widen the scope of criticism. Arguments resting on empirical harms to women in the production of pornography, for instance, ordinarily speak only to live action pornography, since this involves actual people. They remain mute, however, about hand-drawn and computer-generated pornographic imagery, whose relevant moral flaws are not plausibly grounded in how they are produced. Personification arguments do not face this limitation.

In miniature, then, personification arguments call to mind Immanuel Kant's attempt to construct his entire normative ethical edifice on an *a priori* foundation. The similarities to Kant are also evident in what we might call the personification arguments' "formal" approach, a consequence of its discounting empirical evidence. One straightforward way to morally criticize pornography is to look at its content: what it depicts. Personification arguments do not do this. They look instead at pornography's practical form: the function it serves, or the principle under which it is produced, within a given practice of sexual consumption. For Kant, morality as such was concerned, as he put it, "not with the matter of the action and what is to result from it, but with the form and the principle from which the action itself follows" (Kant 1785/1998, 27 [4: 416]). Kant's Categorical Imperative was formal insofar as it abstracted away from the contingent goals of individual rational agents (Kant 1785/1998, 36 [4: 428]). Similarly, as will become clear, personification arguments abstract away from the "matter" of pornography. If they work at all, they do so without appeal to the depicted content of pornographic representation. All that matters for such arguments is, as it were, the pornographic form—being manufactured or used to satisfy sexual appetite. Taking such an approach, which heroically eschews all empirical evidence, might appear a fool's errand. Yet one must admit that the audacity makes it rather tantalizing.

Tantalizing but, in the case at hand, futile. In this paper, I argue first that the personification literature's most carefully articulated arguments, which I call the Ontological and Presupposition Arguments, fail—the former spectacularly so. Second, I

formulate a new version of the remaining live argument, the Presupposition Argument, that gets around my main objection. I then use this reformulation to show why any argument with the same form must fail. I conclude that, barring a wholly new kind of argument, there is no ethically interesting connection between personification and objectification.

Thinking about the permutations of personification arguments is interesting in its own right. The paper's more practical aim, however, is to show how a certain line of thought that has tempted several very prominent feminists leads to a dead-end. Doing so helps clear the way for thinking about practices akin to the personification of pornography—namely, imaginative engagement with it (and, perhaps, with other forms of sexual surrogacy). It is for this reason that I close by suggesting we turn to emerging work on the ethics of the imagination. For, it is here that we can mobilize alternative arguments in the direction of those I criticize, while avoiding their roadblocks. To do so would be to look carefully again at what and how pornography depicts and calls upon consumers to imagine. It would be, in that regard, to abandon the formal approach of the personification arguments in favor of a content-oriented approach.

The Ontological Argument

The aim of the arguments I consider is to show that pornography wrongs women necessarily and not for contingent empirical reasons, such as its statistical effects on violence against women. The idea is that manufacturing and consuming pornography entail personification, which entails objectification, making such manufacture and consumption constitutively ethically flawed.

The first attempt at drawing this connection I call the Ontological Argument. In outline, it goes like this: by personifying an object, one enlarges the category of persons to include mere objects. This deprives persons of their essential *personhood*, since the original persons no longer necessarily enjoy their moral qualities—autonomy, rights, interests, etc. In short, it objectifies them. In the context of feminist concerns with pornography, the Ontological Argument says that pornographic objects personified as women *are* women. As such, their existence relegates flesh-and-blood women to an ontological category that includes objects. This renders their consent irrelevant to sexual activity.⁴

The Ontological Argument is due to Melinda Vadas (2005), who begins by analysing pornography from within its “context of practicality”: its manufacture-for-use in sexual activity. Pornography is provisionally defined as any object “manufactured to satisfy sexual desire through its sexual consumption or other sexual use as a woman or child, or as a man, or transsexual, or as part or parts or combinations of these, or variations of these” (Vadas 2005, 177). Sexual desire is *appetitive*, like hunger. This means the “appetitive act” of satisfying rather than just arousing it requires particular physiological changes that a mere representation cannot produce. Just as consuming a mere representation of water will not slake one's thirst, so a merely represented woman, say, cannot satisfy one's sexual desire. And since pornography users perform genuine rather than merely imagined sex acts with it, pornography so used cannot be a mere representation. Instead, Vadas says, it is a sex object. Rae Langton helps motivate this point:

[I]magine a thing that can be used in the way that a gun is used but which is made from materials typically used to *represent* guns: imagine a gun made of paper. If it can be used as a gun, it is a gun. Apply these principles now to the question about pornography. If something is used as a female sex object, then—even if it is made of paper—it *is* a female sex object, and not a mere depiction of one. (Langton 1995, 181)

As a sex object, it is, moreover, “formally female” because lacking sentience and thus agency (186–87). Pornography’s “sexual role,” therefore, “can only be that of the woman/object in the degraded formulation of the sexual dynamic described by Catherine Mackinnon as ‘man fucks woman; subject verb object.’” This point requires the provisional definition’s revision: pornography is “any object, whether in appearance male, female, child, or transsexual ... that has been manufactured to satisfy sexual desire through its sexual use or consumption as a woman.” (Vadas 2005, 187). In short, to realize something that functions to passively satisfy men’s sexual desires, whether by manufacturing it or, derivatively, by consuming it as such, is to produce a formal woman, even if it is also an object. This is meant to work much as preparing something for ingestion or, derivatively, eating it, is to produce formal food, even if it is ostensibly non-food (e.g., bark, leather, hummingbirds).⁵

Read casually, Vadas’ argument might seem to rely on an outrageous gender essentialism on which women *ought* to serve as sex objects. But we must avoid this caricature. It is useful to compare her argument to Neil Levy’s perhaps surprising argument that virtual child pornography harms *women* because it eroticizes sexual inequality (Levy 2002). In these unequal relations, women (qua women) fill the subordinate role, men the dominant one. Vadas’ point draws on a similar thought: the roles of agent and patient, subject and object, in this unequal division of labor are occupied by men and women, respectively. This happens in virtue of the kind of social categories “man” and “woman” carve out. Vadas merely relies on the familiar radical feminist point that, as Catherine MacKinnon puts it, “woman” is defined by what male desire requires for arousal and satisfaction” (MacKinnon 1989a, 318–19).

With pornography’s formal womanhood in place, the Ontological Argument can get going. Since a pornographic object *is* (formally) a woman, its manufacture adds non-persons to the class of women. This “ontologically grounds” the contingency of women’s personhood and their capacity to consent. Rendered contingent, women’s personhood becomes “conceptually outside the practice of the sexual,” no more relevant to women’s involvement in sex than a car’s colour is to driving it (Vadas 2005, 190). Women’s sexual identities are thereby reduced to being “rapable.” Thus, by personifying pornography as a woman, one drives a conceptual wedge between *WOMAN* and *PERSON*. One thereby constitutively objectifies women and renders their consent “conceptually irrelevant” to sex acts (Vadas 2005, 191).

Various objections have been flung against the Ontological Argument and the account of pornography on which it rests. First, using or treating something as an *F* does not necessarily make it an *F* (Saul 2006, 50; Papadaki 2010, 231–33; Williams 2016); using a tennis racket, or even a banjo, as a guitar does not make it one; treating a suspect as a culprit does not make her one. So, merely treating or using pornography as a woman does not make it one either. Second, pornography use does not clearly reduce women’s sexuality to rapability for three reasons. One, the claim that we cannot distinguish our obligations to two things in the same ontological category is false (Saul 2006, 50–51; Papadaki 2010, 234). The animal category, for instance, includes humans and sponges, our obligations to whom we distinguish easily. Two, the argument just as easily supports the elevation of objects as the demotion of women. This would make consent relevant to sex with objects, rather than irrelevant to sex with women (Papadaki 2010, 233–34). Three, rapability plausibly entails the capacity to consent. If so, this capacity’s removal would make women *unrapable*, *contra* Vadas (Papadaki 2017, 143n.).

Further difficulties are unremarked in the literature. First, women’s sexual identity is not reduced to rapability by rape’s possibility any more than consensual sex’s possibility

reduces women's sexual identity in the opposite way. At least, more argument is needed to justify the asymmetrical reduction. Second, even granting that objects could make women's capacity to consent contingent, the contention that this makes consent as irrelevant to sex with women as a car's redness is to driving it is implausible. The analogy relies on a thing's contingent properties not figuring meaningfully in its typical activities. But sometimes they do. A car with a manual transmission has it only contingently; it could have an automatic transmission instead. Yet, the idea that a car's manual transmission "is unrelated to the act of driving," as anyone who has driven a manual car appreciates, is ridiculous. So, a capacity to consent's contingency alone would not make it irrelevant to sex acts with women.

The Ontological Argument's proponent might object: a manual transmission is part of a particular car's essence and therefore necessary to it, even if it is not essential to cars generally; it is essential qua *this* manual car, even if not qua car.⁶ If so, the woman's capacity to consent would be less like the car's transmission and more like its colour. However, a manual transmission is essential to an individual car only to the extent that the capacity to consent is essential to an individual woman. If the Ontological Argument is sound, then this capacity is not essential to women in general, but still to particular women who enjoy the capacity; it is not essential qua woman, but qua *this* woman. So, transmission, not colour, represents the closer analogue to the capacity to consent. Both are contingent for membership in the broader category, though necessary features of those members of the category who in fact enjoy the respective feature.

One might push the response deeper: is the capacity to consent really a necessary feature of women who possess it? If a woman becomes comatose, for instance, then while she continues to be numerically the same person, she loses her capacity to consent; hence, she cannot enjoy the capacity necessarily. This is true, assuming that comatose people are unable to consent. Though, practices around advanced directives and hypothetical consent in such cases problematize this assumption. However, the larger difficulty is that this approach secures the objector a hollow victory at best. Suppose women do enjoy only a contingent capacity to consent because of the possibility of coma. This only holds because *any* human being might fall into a coma. But now pornography cannot be blamed for creating women's contingent capacity to consent; the contingency was already there (a thought I return to shortly). In defending the dialectically fine point that women only contingently possess the capacity to consent, the Ontological Argument's defender loses sight of the main objective: showing that *pornography* grounds this contingency.

A different worry concerns Vadas' claim that pornography is a sex object with an extra-representational ontic status. Vadas claims this, recall, because she takes pornography to satisfy the sexual appetite. And this, she claims, a mere representation cannot do. However, a more straightforward analysis is available, on which pornography is not a sex object intercoursed with in appetitive sex acts, but rather aids the performance of such acts. Since mere representations *can* serve as aids, pornography need not transcend mere representation on this analysis. Such an analysis becomes even more attractive when we turn from commercial pornography to privately imagined sexual fantasy. Even if pornographic magazines, videos, etc. are robust enough to satisfy the sexual appetite, ontically gossamer mental states do not seem to be. They are, as Mercutio puts it, "as thin of substance as the air and more inconstant than the wind" (Shakespeare 2000, 187 [act I, scene 4, lines 97–8]). In any case, even if one accepts Vadas' claim that the sexual appetite can be satisfied only by an extra-representational entity, the pornography-user already has one quite literally to hand. If masturbation is a

reflexive sex act—that is, one performed with or upon oneself—then the entity with which the pornography user consummates the sex act is himself;⁷ pornography need not play this role.⁸

There might be ways to respond to some of these arguments. Ultimately, however, it does not matter; the Ontological Argument suffers a more fundamental problem. Namely, the modal terms in which it captures pornography’s ontological harmfulness means any argument with the same form must fail, as I explain.

“Pornography’s manufacture-for-use,” Vadas tells us, “harms all women, for all women become not necessarily persons ... when women who are not persons are brought into existence” (Vadas 2005, 192). Vadas’ idea, as outlined above, is that once one populates the world with women who are *not* persons (by manufacturing pornography), then the set of women comes to include both persons and non-persons. In other words, women as such become persons only contingently; equivalently, they cease to be persons necessarily.

Readers puzzled by the temporally inflected modal language are, in a way, right to be puzzled; since Vadas’ worry concerns which properties women have necessarily, the ontological harm she attributes to pornography must logically precede it. For, were the thrust of the Ontological Argument correct, the mere possibility of pornography’s use as a woman would suffice to make women’s personhood contingent. This point is perfectly general. Some chocolate at our world is manufactured by Hershey’s. So we inhabit a world where some chocolate smells like vomit and tastes like sugar—“sucks,” for short. But our world might have been different. At some possible worlds, no chocolate sucks because Hershey’s makes terrible coffee instead, or does not even exist. Yet, even in these worlds, sucky chocolate is still a possibility; despite no one in fact producing it, someone *could*. Likewise, even if no pornography had ever been manufactured or used, the mere possibility of its manufacture and use would ground women’s personhood contingent by itself. The real-world manufacture of pornography might *demonstrate* this horrible contingency by actualizing it in concrete form, a point Vadas stresses (Vadas 2005, 189). However, as regards making it the case that “women as such are not necessarily persons” (189), pornography’s manufacture and use in merely possible worlds does all the ontological damage. Perhaps the only remedy for *this* ontological injustice is, in Sally Haslanger’s words, “to bring about a day when there are no more women” (Haslanger 2000, 46)—namely, by eradicating the sexually marked subordination that generates the gender category. If it is possible for (pornographic) objects to *be* women (but, importantly, not men), this reflects something antecedently rotten in the gender category. Manufacturing or using pornography as a woman would then be symptomatic of this rot, not its source.

To be clear, this would not mean pornography’s manufacture or use is ethically unblemished. Nor do I claim this. Symptoms often share in the flaws of their deeper causes. No one should excuse wage theft just because it is symptomatic of structural economic injustice, for instance. Nor should they excuse the eye-watering imbecility of Sean Hannity’s programming just because it is a symptom of the perverse incentives governing cable news. What I am arguing instead is that Vadas’ argument undermines itself in a particular way. In order for pornography’s actual manufacture or use to do the ontological harm Vadas assigns it, the possibility that women be non-persons must already exist. But since making this possible *is* the ontological harm, it is a harm that preceded pornography’s actual manufacture or use. It is a harm that pornography’s manufacture and use cannot explain. In short, there are possible worlds where pornography is made, and that is enough to ontologically harm women. Pornography at the actual world plays no role in this harm, even if it harms in other ways.

Let us briefly recap. The Ontological Argument says pornography's manufacturers and users personify it by treating it as "formally female"—as a woman. In doing this, such users turn pornographic items into women, thereby amplifying the ontological category of women to include non-persons. In this respect, pornography's manufacture and use constitutively makes women's personhood and, crucially, their associated capacity to consent (to sex) contingent. In short, it relegates their sexuality to "rapability." In this section, I showed that numerous serious problems beset this argument. Ultimately, the most devastating is that its modal inferences are unworkable. If we accept everything else in the argument, then the mere possibility of amplifying the woman category, not the actual amplification, makes women "rapable."

The Presupposition Argument

The Ontological Argument is unsalvageable. Part of the difficulty seems to be that it strives to establish a constitutive relationship between activities: personification and objectification. One way around this difficulty is to shift attention from the activities themselves to the *attitudes* they presuppose. This is the dialectical advance the Presupposition Argument makes. It has the following shape: to personify an object requires treating it as serving some end one takes persons (perhaps of a particular kind) to serve. Doing this presupposes a belief that persons (of a particular kind) serve ends or have functions as such. This is, at least sometimes, to objectify them. Personifying pornography, then, presupposes the objectifying belief that women have functions.

The Presupposition Argument, as formulated by Jennifer Saul, relies on the following account of personification:

PERSONIFY

To personify an object as a woman is to treat it as serving one of a woman's functions.

The idea is that personifying in this sense requires pornography users to believe that women, qua women, have at least one function: gratifying men sexually. Since this belief instrumentalizes women, personification presupposes objectification.⁹ Unlike the Ontological Argument, the claim here is not that one objectifies in virtue of personifying. It is rather that an objectifying belief must be in place to personify at all. Objectification is a necessary condition on personification, but not grounded in it.

PERSONIFY, however, suffers in two related respects. The first failure is a minor exegetical one. Saul seeks to establish a tighter connection "between the sort of sexual personification that Vadas and Langton discuss and sexual objectification." In short, she aims to adopt Vadas' account of personification for her own (Saul 2006, 46). But Saul's account is more restrictive than Vadas'. According to Vadas, personifying pornography means using it "as a woman",

[in] the very same sense in which it is said that music is used as therapy or that a sandwich is consumed as food. "As" is here a preposition meaning "in the role, function, or capacity of." (Vadas 2005, 178)

A crucial terminological fact about Saul's paper is that Vadas' "role, function, or capacity" reduces to "function." If Saul wishes to adopt Vadas' account, this reduction is inapt.

This terminological shift obscures the second, substantive failure: Saul's PERSONIFY is a less plausible account of personification than others, including the very account it is meant to capture—namely, Vadas', which I will call "PERSONIFY^V".

PERSONIFY^V

To personify an object as a woman is to treat it as serving (in) a woman's role, function, or capacity.

PERSONIFY^V is more intuitive than PERSONIFY. It not only captures more *prima facie* kinds of personification than PERSONIFY. It also makes personification possible absent any functions or beliefs about such. And this is what ruptures any philosophically interesting connection between personification and objectification, as I now show.

Even if treating pornography as serving a woman's (supposed) *function* presupposes an objectifying attitude, treating it as serving in a woman's *capacity* does not. One can use a cocktail umbrella to adorn a drink. But one can also use it to shield mice from tiny drops of rain. The former use honours what the artifact is meant for, however this idea is worked out, whereas the latter uses the artifact for a purpose it accidentally serves. Adorning drinks is a cocktail umbrella's *function*; adorably shielding small rodents from precipitation, picking teeth, and stabbing assailants in the eye are merely some of its *capacities*. Capacities are things an entity, or entities of its kind, can typically (be made to) do. Functions, if any, are that subset of the entity's capacities that, by design, intention, history, or whatever, prescribe norms for it and its user. A cocktail umbrella that cannot adorn cocktails fails as a cocktail umbrella; one that cannot keep mice dry does not. In a slogan: functions entail *oughts*, capacities, *cans*.¹⁰

This reading of "capacity" is illustrated by Vadas' example of music as therapy. Using music this way neither prescribes a therapeutic function to music nor presupposes one. Therapy does not mandate norms for music in the way that tightening screws does for screwdrivers (except, perhaps, where the music is therapeutic by design). Rather, using music as therapy exploits one practical possibility among many: one of music's "capacities." And while it is possible that music qua music lacks functions, it clearly enjoys capacities.

Similarly, while it is right to dispute that women as women have functions, they obviously enjoy capacities. Since women's capacities establish no norms for them in the relevant sense, treating an object as serving in a woman's capacity presupposes no norms for women. Hence, doing so need not objectify them. This is as true of using pornography for sexual gratification as it is of dressing a mannequin to see how clothes might look on a woman or admiring an Artemisia Gentileschi self-portrait to appreciate a woman's appearance. All of these activities use objects to serve in a woman's capacity. Yet, they are morally innocent, at least *as* personifications.

The Presupposition Argument, whether in the original form devised by Saul or with my modifications, appears as frustrated as the one it was meant to supplant. In the next section, I salvage parts of Vadas' Ontological Argument to rebuild the Presupposition Argument so as to overcome both the exegetical and substantive objections. However, doing so will reveal a more powerful objection, one showing why *any* argument with the Presupposition Argument's form must fail.

A final attempt

To reformulate the Presupposition Argument, let me revisit the Ontological Argument's account of pornography. Doing so will reveal more nuance than PERSONIFY^V can capture.

Pornography’s inclusion in the class of women rests on a couple of claims. First, pornography is something with which someone has sex and, relatedly, manufactured for this use. Second, pornography is non-sentient. Combining these, one has something that serves to consummate sex acts non-sentiently—hence, cannot consent. It is this that is meant to explain why pornography is treated as a woman—why it is “formally female”—rather than, say, a man.

One might object that the inability to consent could just as well make sex objects formally juvenile or animal rather than formally female. After all, these are other beings routinely subjected to consentless sex. To avoid this objection, the argument requires a supplementary premise. To treat an entity as a woman is not merely to treat it in a way one *could* treat a woman; many of these are compatible with treating it as a man, animal, child, or whatever. Rather, it is to treat the entity in a way that prevailing patriarchal norms *defining the gender categories* demand women be treated. This explains why using something with diminished agency, autonomy, and subjectivity—in short, personhood—to satisfy sexual desire counts as treating it as a woman. For, this sexual role is one to which women have not merely been subjected as an empirical matter, as children and animals have. It is one which they have been paradigmatically consigned to fill *as women*.

This modification helps anyone making the Ontological Argument avoid committing a theoretic *faux pas* themselves—namely, taking a woman’s function qua individual to be sexually satisfying men.¹¹ It also sharpens my earlier point about the gender category as such. If *pornography* fulfills women’s patriarchally given norms, this reflects how repugnant those norms are. They mark women out as, in part, those beings suited to sexually gratifying (men) in agentially mitigated ways. This is why pornography’s joining the category of women, if true, reveals the rottenness of the category, not the rottenness of pornographic consumption as such.

All this suggests a third account of personification:

PERSONIFY*

To personify an object as a woman is to treat it as serving (in) a woman’s role, function, or capacity qua member of a patriarchally constituted gender.

PERSONIFY* is closer to the original PERSONIFY than PERSONIFY^v, since a woman’s capacity qua member of a patriarchally constituted gender, being normatively constrained, is something like a woman’s function. (In that respect, this absolves Saul of the exegetical error.) Though this makes it a less attractive account of personification for reasons given earlier, it permits a rephrasing of the Presupposition Argument that avoids the substantive objection. For someone to treat pornography as a woman, he must consider women subject to patriarchal norms. Since these norms are objectifying, this means having an objectifying attitude towards women.

However, this line of reasoning relies on a particular reading of “subject to patriarchal norms.” Specifically, the reformulated Presupposition Argument succeeds on a normative reading on which the personifier sees this subjection as *legitimate*; deeming women legitimately subject to objectifying patriarchal norms objectifies them. But there is a descriptive and potentially critical reading available. On this reading, the personifier merely registers that women are, in fact, subject, or *subjected*, to such norms. Doing this is not objectifying. So, for the reformulated argument to work, those personifying pornography would have to universally presuppose women’s legitimate subjection to patriarchal norms. But do they?

Clearly not. Someone might personify a washing machine, per PERSONIFY*, by thinking of it as doing work to which women have often been consigned *as women*. But this personification might be done at a critical distance from the patriarchal division of labor it presupposes, treating the washing machine's "substitution" as a welcome affront to patriarchy. Similarly, if pornography substitutes for women in the same sense as the washing machine, its personifiers can take a similarly critical attitude to women's subjection. As such, showing that personifiers must see women as subject to such norms does nothing to reconnect personification to objectification. Such personification may presuppose no more than what any feminist accepts.

But now one can see why the original Presupposition Argument and indeed *any* argument of the same form must fail. For, just as the attitudes personification presupposes on the reformulated argument are ambiguous between normative and descriptive readings, so are the attitudes presupposed on the original argument. Specifically, accepting that women "have as one function (perhaps among many) that of providing sexual satisfaction to men" (Saul 2006, 57) can be read normatively or descriptively, as acknowledging that patriarchal norms assign women such a function legitimately or merely as a matter of fact. Again, the latter is no more than feminists routinely accept. As such, any argument of this form will fail to show that personification requires an objectifying attitude. This is a problem, even if we grant that personification requires beliefs about women's functions, capacities, roles, or whatever. Since these "functions," "capacities," etc. can always be presupposed at a critical distance, rather than endorsed, no objectifying attitude need ever arise. Regardless of how the argument goes, then, personifiers of pornography, or indeed sex dolls, or robots need not thereby objectify women, even if they likely objectify them in other ways.

Of course, the Presupposition Argument's defender can respond. Though there are two ways to consider women subject to patriarchal norms, the ordinary, male, heterosexual pornography consumer is evidently not doing so in the morally innocent, critical way. Such a user's personifying act is an objectifying one. And while this response, unlike the original Presupposition Argument, relies on an empirical premise about pornography users' typical attitudes, the premise is uncontroversial. So runs the thought.

Relying on this empirical premise means giving up the Presupposition Argument's original ambitions. After all, some users of pornography might very well personify in the morally innocent way. But there is a more serious problem. The empirical premise salvages a connection between personification and objectification only at a severe cost: the argument now begs the question and, in so doing, makes personification irrelevant.

Personification becomes irrelevant because it no longer performs the argumentative work it was supposed to. And it no longer performs this work because, whatever connection between personification and objectification is salvaged depends entirely on the new empirical premise. This premise states that ordinary consumers are guilty of adopting morally criticizable, objectifying attitudes towards women, which is just the Presupposition Argument's conclusion. Including it as a premise, therefore, baldly begs the question. And because this premise provides the conclusion by itself, no further premises about personification or anything else are needed; hence, the appeal to personification is otiose.

The revised Presupposition Argument's defender has one final card to play. The premise needed to restore the objectification-personification connection need not baldly assert the argument's conclusion—that is, that pornography users presuppose objectifying attitudes. Nor need it, therefore, beg the question. Assuming that the rest of the Presupposition Argument works, then it establishes that consumers of pornography must presuppose things about women in one of two ways. The added premise,

therefore, need only make a conditional claim: *if* pornography consumers presuppose any attitude about women's conformity to patriarchal norms, then it is of the objectifying and not the merely descriptive kind.

However, satisfactorily motivating this conditional premise looks hopeless. Whatever grounds one has to accept it are precisely the grounds one has to accept the conditional's consequent—that is, the question-begging conclusion. Deploying this conditional premise is, therefore, akin to arguing that the Earth is flat by relying on this conditional premise: *if* the Earth has a shape, then it must be flat. True, this conditional claim is logically weaker than the claim that the Earth is flat, just as the revised Presupposition Argument's conditional claim is weaker than the conclusion. But there is no more reason to accept the one than the other. The conditional premise, therefore, still begs the question.

Aesthetics to the rescue?

I have shown that personifying pornography entails no wrongdoing connected to objectification—or, at least, that existing arguments for this connection cannot work. Yet, as suggested in the last section, this obviously does not show that male, heterosexual users of pornography have a free hand. Whether particular uses of such pornography are justified on balance, users clearly sometimes adopt the kinds of objectifying attitudes theorists like Martha Nussbaum identify. Most pornography is, if not misogynistic, at least replete with misogynistic tropes. So if the destination is connecting its manufacture and use to objectification, there are less convoluted routes to get there.

Of course, I have granted though not argued that some forms of objectification are ethically criticizable. Evidently, some forms of objectification are immoral, even immoral *qua* objectification: enslaving someone, for instance. And some of these may pertain to the discussion. Many pornographic portrayals, especially where these present pornographic actresses as essentialized and fungible in a way typical of objects may constitute a wrong (Zheng 2016, 407–08; Neufeld 2020). Other forms of objectification are morally neutral; Nussbaum gives the example of using a lover's stomach as a pillow (Nussbaum 1995, 265).¹²

Treating things as people, or women, or women with tightly constrained, hyper-sexualized roles, deserves careful ethical scrutiny. And Vadas' attempt to use it to identify an intrinsic, constitutive wrong, like the better-known attempt to show that pornography illocutionarily silences women, is intriguing and important. As mentioned, such a criticism would supplement empirical criticisms grounded in the harmful effects of pornography's production and consumption, while avoiding some of their difficulties. But Vadas' literal-minded account dismisses what is arguably pornographic consumption's most interesting, if theoretically challenging, component: the imagination (Vadas 2005, 179–80). And not for good reasons. Vadas points out that “there is every reason to believe that the sex act a man performs when he consumes pornography is a real sex act.” True enough. She then vaults to the conclusion that this act is thus “not an imaginary sex act or a simulacrum of a sex act” (179). But the leap is fallacious. An actor might comb her hair, eat an apple, or utter a sentence to make it fictional that she does these things, as a child might in playing a conventional game of make-believe. The fact that a real sex act is performed makes no dent in the idea that an imaginary one may also be. Nor does it dent the idea that the imaginary act may be more contextually significant. True, it is not the case that *only* an imaginary sex act is performed. However, if the real sex act as such is as ethically uninteresting as my discussion suggests, attending to the imaginative sex act seems sensible.

Tying the last few paragraphs' thoughts together, it is in addressing the ethics of the imagination, I think, that work in the spirit of Vadas' is most promising. *Imagining* of something—a doll, a visual representation, a sex toy, etc.—that it is a person is akin to personification. Whether it counts as personification proper depends on whether using something *as though it were* a person is a way of using it *as a* person. However this issue is settled, showing that this kind of quasi-personification happens in pornographic consumption requires none of Vadas' more exotic metaphysical inferences. As already mentioned, plenty has been written on the ethics of pornography.¹³ There is also a small but growing literature on the intrinsic ethics of the imagination.¹⁴ Yet, relatively little has been written explicitly at the intersection of these topics.¹⁵ This is unfortunate. Whether it is wrong for pornographic or other works to *endorse* misogynistic attitudes is uncontroversial. But whether it is wrong for pornographic works to invite users to adopt such attitudes *merely in imagination*—to “prescribe” them¹⁶—and for users to comply with this prescription, is a further question.¹⁷ Moreover, it is an important one, since an obvious rejoinder to moral concerns about endorsement is to claim, sometimes plausibly, that many pornographic works do *not* endorse the attitudes they prescribe. On this line, pornography structurally resembles horror comedy films or children's playfights. These require appreciators and participants to take up pro-attitudes towards violence in imagination. Yet, ordinarily, they do not endorse this violence.

This question, concerning the ethics of imaginative prescription, is central to adjudicating whether pornography suffers an intrinsic moral flaw. And the doubt at the question's heart explains why one cannot simply assert that pornography users presuppose patriarchal attitudes towards women, as the revised Presupposition Argument did. These attitudes evidently play *some* role in pornography and its consumption. But whether they are endorsed by a work and sincerely adopted by the consumer, or merely prescribed and adopted by the consumer in imagination, is not always clear. And whether the latter is ethically criticizable remains an open question.¹⁸

It seems to me, then, that the Presupposition Argument's ambitions, and those of the personification strategy more broadly, cannot be fulfilled without settling further questions about the ethics of the imagination. If that is right then, as feminist ethicists, we ought to look to aesthetics for guidance. Whether the notion of personification will aid the aesthetician in turn remains to be seen.

Acknowledgments. Thanks to Robin Zheng, Jennifer Saul, and Aidan McGlynn for help and encouragement. Thanks also to the anonymous referees who provided useful feedback. *Dieses Werk ist den Alten Herren des ETV gewidmet; ayaklarnıza sağlık.*

Notes

1 MacKinnon 1993, esp. 25–26, 109–10; Langton 1995, 176–84; Vadas 2005; Saul 2006. A work that inspires this literature is Mackinnon 1993, esp. her remarks on 109–10 about “sex between people and things, human beings and pieces of paper, real men and unreal women.” An early argument in a similar spirit is in Kant 1797/1996, 178 (6: 425). Saul 2006 introduces the term “personify.”

2 See, e.g., Eaton 2007.

3 See, e.g., Tyler 2015.

4 What “woman” means, what treating someone “as a woman” amounts to, and whether there is anything approaching a unified way that different kinds of women are treated, is controversial and perhaps more controversial now than when Vadas made her argument (or, at least, for different reasons). See, e.g., Saul 2012; Bettcher 2013; Díaz-León 2016; Chaddock & Hinderliter 2019. Happily, my arguments swing free from these difficult questions.

5 An objection: what if the pornography in question depicts a man? This is irrelevant to Vadas' claim, which is about the pornographic artifact's form (an object manufactured and used to consummate sex acts) and not its content (a depiction of a man).

- 6 For a quick and influential account of particular things' essences, see Yablo 1992, 161–62.
- 7 See Kant 1797/1996, 178 (6: 425) and esp. (Soble 1991, 134–35; 2017, 106) for descriptions of (solo) masturbation along these lines. See Migotti and Wyatt 2017) for the opposed view.
- 8 I thank a referee for encouraging me to question Vadas' approach here.
- 9 *Instrumentalization* is one of numerous kinds of objectification Martha Nussbaum identifies (1995, 257). Another is *denial of autonomy*, which unqualifiedly instrumentalizing women plausibly entails. She considers each, from different angles, “the most morally exigent” form of objectification (Nussbaum 1995, 259–60).
- 10 Artifact theorists make a distinction in the same spirit between an artifact's *proper* and *accidental* functions (the terminology varies). One might worry that, since on some accounts, a mere intention to use something a certain way gives it a proper function, my function/capacity distinction collapses. First, however, women are not artifacts. So, even accepting such accounts, nothing here follows. Second, were the conditions on being a proper function so weak, it would no longer follow, if it ever did, from assuming that women have (proper) functions that one objectifies them. Functions, in this weakened sense, could include any instance whatsoever of what I have called “capacities,” which sever any connection between personification and objectification. For helpful discussion of proper functions, see Preston 2009, 221–31.
- 11 Evangelia Papadaki (2010, 233) accuses Melinda Vadas of this blunder.
- 12 See, e.g., Marino 2008 for a general defense of objectification under conditions of genuine consent. For a blunt, if often uncharitable, defense of the claim that pornography objectifies and that there is nothing wrong with this, see Soble 2002, esp. 49–89.
- 13 E.g., Dworkin 1981; Hill 1986; Mackinnon 1989b, esp. 195–214; Langton 1993; Eaton 2007; Zheng 2017; Neufeld 2020.
- 14 E.g., Patridge 2011; Cooke 2014; Sher 2019; Zheng & Stear 2023.
- 15 Protasi and Liao 2013; Bartel & Cremaldi 2018 are exceptions. See also Soble 2002, 52–53.
- 16 The term is borrowed from work on fiction and the imagination in aesthetics.
- 17 See Hopkins 1994; Stear 2009, for related discussion.
- 18 Robin Zheng and I argue, roughly, that attitudes of this kind—namely, oppressive attitudes—are ethically criticizable even when merely adopted in imagination. See Zheng and Stear 2023.

References

- Bartel, Christopher, and Anna Cremaldi. 2018. “It’s just a story”: Pornography, desire, and the ethics of fictive imagining. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58 (1): 38–50.
- Bettcher, Talia Mae. 2013. Trans women and the meaning of “woman.” In *The philosophy of sex*, ed. Nicholas Power, Raja Halwani, and Alan Soble. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chaddock, Noelle, and Beth Hinderliter. 2019. Introduction. In *Antagonizing white feminism: Intersectionality’s critique of women’s studies and the academy*, ed. Noelle Chaddock and Beth Hinderliter. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Cooke, Brandon. 2014. Ethics and fictive imagining. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (3): 318–19.
- Cox-George, Chantal, and Susan Bewley. 2018. I, sex robot: The health implications of the sex robot industry. *BMJ Sexual and Reproductive Health* 44 (3): 161–64.
- Díaz-León, Esa. 2016. Woman as a politically significant term: A solution to the puzzle. *Hypatia* 31 (2): 245–58.
- Dworkin, Andrea. 1981. *Pornography: Men possessing women*. New York: Plume.
- Eaton, A. W. 2007. A sensible antiporn feminism. *Ethics* 117 (4): 674–715.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2000. Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be? *Noûs* 34 (1): 31–55.
- Hill, Judith M. 1986. Pornography and degradation. *Hypatia* 2 (2): 39–54.
- Hopkins, Patrick D. 1994. Rethinking sadomasochism: Feminism, interpretation, and simulation. *Hypatia* 9 (1): 116–41.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1785/1998. *Groundwork for a metaphysics of morals*, ed. Mary Gregor, trans. Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1797/1996. *Metaphysics of morals*, ed. Mary Gregor, trans. Mary Gregor. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Langton, Rae. 1993. Speech acts and unspeakable acts. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (4): 305–30.
- Langton, Rae. 1995. Sexual solipsism. *Philosophical Topics* 23 (2): 149–87.
- Levy, Neil. 2002. Virtual child pornography: The eroticization of inequality. *Ethics and Information Technology* 4: 319–23.

- MacKinnon, Catherine A. 1989a. Sexuality, pornography, and method: "Pleasure under patriarchy." *Ethics* 99 (2): 314–46.
- MacKinnon, Catherine A. 1989b. *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MacKinnon, Catherine A. 1993. *Only words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Marino, Patricia. 2008. The ethics of sexual objectification: Autonomy and consent. *Inquiry* 51 (4): 345–64.
- Migotti, Mark, and Nicole Wyatt. 2017. On the very idea of sex with robots. In *Robot sex: Social and ethical implications*, ed. John Danaher, and Neil McArthur. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 15–27.
- Neufeld, Eleonore. 2020. Pornography and dehumanization: The essentialist dilemma. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 98 (4): 703–17.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1995. Objectification. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24 (4): 249–91.
- Papadaki, Evangelia. 2010. Pornography: Is there a connection between treating things as people and treating people as things? In *Sex, drugs, and rock and roll: Psychological, legal and cultural examinations of sex and sexuality*, ed. Helen Gavin and Jacquelyn Bent. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press.
- Papadaki, Lina. 2017. Treating pornography as a woman and women's objectification. In *Beyond speech*, ed. Mari Mikkola. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Patridge, Stephanie. 2011. The incorrigible social meaning of video game imagery. *Ethics and Information Technology* 13 (4): 303–12.
- Preston, Beth. 2009. Philosophical theories of artifact function. In *Philosophy of technology and engineering sciences*, ed. Anthonie Meijers. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Protasi, Sara, and Shen-yi Liao. 2013. The fictional character of pornography. In *Pornographic art and the aesthetics of pornography*, ed. Hans Maes. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Saul, Jennifer. 2006. On treating things as people: Objectification, pornography, and the history of the vibrator. *Hypatia* 21 (2): 45–61.
- Saul, Jennifer. 2012. Politically significant terms and philosophy of language. In *Out from the shadows: analytical feminist contributions to traditional philosophy*, ed. S. Crasnow and A. Superson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 2000. *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Jill L. Levenson. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sher, George. 2019. A wild west of the mind. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97 (3): 483–96.
- Soble, Alan. 1991. Masturbation and sexual philosophy. In *The philosophy of sex*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Soble, Alan. 2002. *Pornography, sex, and feminism*. Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books.
- Soble, Alan. 2017. An essay on masturbation. In *The philosophy of sex: Contemporary readings*, ed. Raja Halwani, Alan Soble, Sarah Hoffman, and Jacob M. Held. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Stear, Nils-Hennes. 2009. Sodomasochism as make-believe. *Hypatia* 24 (2): 21–38.
- Tyler, Meagan. 2015. Harms of production: Theorising pornography as a form of prostitution. *Women's Studies International Forum* 48: 114–23.
- Vadas, Melinda. 2005. The manufacture-for-use of pornography and women's inequality. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 13 (2): 174–93.
- Williams, Robert. 2016. Vagueness as indecision. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 90 (1): 285–309.
- Yablo, Stephen. 1992. Mental causation. *Philosophical Review* 101 (2): 245–80.
- Zheng, Robin. 2016. Why yellow fever isn't flattering: A case against racial fetishes. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2 (3): 400–19.
- Zheng, Robin. 2017. Race and pornography: The dilemma of the undesirable. In *Beyond speech: Pornography and analytic feminist philosophy*, ed. Mari Mikkola. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zheng, Robin, and Nils-Hennes Stear. 2023. Imagining in oppressive contexts, or, what's wrong with black-face? *Ethics* 133 (3): 381–414.

Nils-Hennes Stear is an associate lecturer in the department of philosophy at Uppsala Universitet. His research spans aesthetics, ethics, feminist philosophy, and their intersections.

Cite this article: Stear N-H (2024). Personification and Objectification. *Hypatia* 39, 145–158. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2023.117>