

# Sexual Objectification\*

*Timo Jütten*

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According to Martha Nussbaum, objectification is essentially a form of instrumentalization or use. I argue that this instrumentalization account fails to capture the distinctive harms and wrongs of sexual objectification, because it does not explain the relationship between instrumentalization and the processes of social stereotyping that make it possible. I develop an imposition account of sexual objectification that provides such an explanation and, therefore, should be preferred over the instrumentalization account. It draws on a contrast between imposition and self-presentation and explains why sexual objectification, understood as the imposition of sex object status on women, is harmful and wrong.

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The concept of sexual objectification is central to feminist approaches to social and political philosophy and to nonacademic feminist social criticism. Academic discourse about sexual objectification can be traced back to Kant, though it has received most attention in the work of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin and, more recently, Martha Nussbaum. In nonacademic discourse, a range of writers and activists criticize as sexual objectification a wide variety of practices and institutions which participate in the construction of women as sex objects.<sup>1</sup> Given this range of uses, it is perhaps not surprising that this concept does not seem to have a settled meaning. Roughly speaking, one can distinguish two competing accounts of sexual objectification. According to the *instrumentalization account*, recently defended by Martha Nussbaum, objectification is essen-

\*Many thanks to René Boomkens, Anthony Booth, Andrew Chitty, Paul Davies, Gordon Finlayson, Bob Goodin, Lisa Herzog, Fiona Hughes, Kai Yin Low, Wayne Martin, David McNeill, Fred Neuhouser, Jörg Schaub, Titus Stahl, Daniel Steuer, Kathleen Stock, Judith Vega, Dan Watts, Tilo Wesche, Rosie Worsdale, and audiences at Essex, Sussex, Frankfurt, and Groningen. I am particularly grateful to Fabian Freyenhagen, two anonymous reviewers, Cheshire Calhoun, and the other associate editors of *Ethics* for their excellent feedback.

1. In this essay I am concerned specifically with the sexual objectification of women in the context of gender inequality. Some aspects of my analysis may be applicable to the sexual objectification of heterosexual men and of gays and lesbians, too, but other aspects clearly are not, and therefore their sexual objectification requires a different analysis.

*Ethics* 127 (October 2016): 27–49

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tially a form of instrumentalization or use.<sup>2</sup> This is a nonmoralized account of objectification. It is an open question whether a given case of instrumentalization and, therefore, objectification is morally wrong, and the challenge for this account is to specify what exactly makes it wrong when it is wrong. Nussbaum's work on objectification has been very influential, and her article is the starting point for most discussions of sexual objectification in moral and political philosophy today.<sup>3</sup> According to the *imposition account*, inspired by Catharine MacKinnon and to be developed here, "to be sexually objectified means having a social meaning imposed on your being that defines you as to be sexually used."<sup>4</sup> Here the defining feature of sexual objectification is the imposition of a social meaning on women, which marks them out as proper objects of instrumentalizing attitudes and treatment that undermine their autonomy and equal social standing. This is a moralized account of objectification; it is always wrong. The challenge for this account is to specify what exactly the imposition of a social meaning is, and why it is wrong.

It may be objected that my rough distinction between the instrumentalization and imposition accounts of sexual objectification is overdrawn. On the one hand, Nussbaum's instrumentalization account of objectification sometimes refers to instrumentalizing social meanings as well as to instrumental use. Indeed, one of her examples of sexual objectification suggests an analysis in terms of the imposition of a social meaning on women.<sup>5</sup> However, Nussbaum's discussion of objectification mostly is concerned with the actual treatment of a human being as a thing, that is, with instrumental use, rather than with the social meanings that make women vulnerable to such instrumental use, and her examples often concern intimate interpersonal relationships, rather than the broader social processes through which meanings are imposed on women as a class. On the other hand, since the imposition account concerns the imposition of a social meaning on women that defines them as "to be used," instru-

2. See Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24 (1995): 249–91, and "Feminism, Virtue, and Objectification," in *Sex and Ethics: Essays on Sexuality, Virtue, and the Good Life*, ed. Raja Halwani (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007). I say "essentially" because I take it that this is the upshot of Nussbaum's complex analysis. I will argue for this view in Sec. I.

3. For discussions of objectification indebted to Nussbaum's account, see, for example, Rae Langton, "Autonomy-Denial in Objectification," in *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Lina Papadaki, "What Is Objectification?" *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 7 (2010): 16–36.

4. Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 140; see also MacKinnon's *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 173.

5. The example concerns pictures in *Playboy* depicting the actress Nicollette Sheridan (Nussbaum, "Objectification," 253).

mentalization clearly is central to this account as well. However, as we shall see, the imposition of that social meaning on women is a harm and wrong in itself, even if it does not lead to actual instrumentalization. Thus, my rough distinction tracks a real difference in content and emphasis between two approaches to sexual objectification. How should we choose between these two approaches?

I believe that there are two closely related adequacy criteria that can help us to choose between the instrumentalization and imposition accounts. First, an adequate account of sexual objectification will track the meaning that feminist social critics typically attribute to it.<sup>6</sup> Second, since our aim is to capture the distinctive features of sexual objectification, an adequate account of it will pick out what is distinctive to the phenomenon and its harms and wrongs. My thesis in this essay is that the imposition account meets these adequacy criteria better than the instrumentalization account. First, it seems to me that most activists who combat sexual objectification conceive of it as the imposition of sex object status on women. For example, the activists of No More Page 3, a campaign group dedicated to challenging the British tabloid newspaper tradition of displaying a topless woman on page 3 of every edition, refer to it as the “normalization of sexual objectification.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the activists of Object, a London-based campaign group dedicated to challenging the “sex object culture” oppose “the sexual objectification of women through lads’ mags, lap dancing clubs or sexist advertising.”<sup>8</sup> This suggests that these groups are concerned primarily with the ways in which women are defined in our culture as objects for male sexual pleasure, that is, as sex objects, and they criticize the media which impose sex object status on women. Second, this imposition of sex object status on women is a specific phenomenon distinct from instrumentalization and harms women’s autonomy and equal social standing even in the absence of actual instrumentalization. Where women are instrumentalized in a morally impermissible way as a result of their sex object status, they are subjected to an additional harm and wrong, which is captured by the concept of mere instrumentalization, but which is not the distinct harm and wrong of sexual objectification. Thus, on the view defended here, imposition of the social meaning “sex object” is a necessary and sufficient condition for sexual objectification. Morally impermissible instrumentalization is neither a necessary nor

6. This adequacy criterion does not prejudice the argument in favor of a moralized account, because feminist social critics could use a nonmoralized account of sexual objectification but only criticize cases in which the phenomenon is morally wrong.

7. See <https://nomorepage3.wordpress.com>.

8. See the description of the group’s aims at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC92LM9vFOX1BsYWgYR1s6Sg/about>.

a sufficient condition for it, but an additional harm and wrong that is made possible by sexual objectification.<sup>9</sup>

I will begin my argument with a brief discussion of Nussbaum's instrumentalization account of objectification, elaborating further on my claim that it does not meet the second adequacy criterion outlined above (Sec. I). Next, I will offer a normative analysis of the harms and wrongs of sexual objectification, drawing on the contrast between imposition and self-presentation (Sec. II). This will put me into position to discuss what it means to be a sex object and how sex object status is imposed on women (Secs. III and IV). In closing, I will briefly discuss a potential limitation of my account of sexual objectification: the fact that sexist meanings are not always imposed on women but sometimes willingly embraced (Sec. V).

## I

Nussbaum's paper on objectification pursues both phenomenological and normative aims. On the phenomenological level she wants to explore what it means to see and/or treat someone as an object.<sup>10</sup> On the normative level she wants to argue that objectification is a nonmoralized concept: while some forms of objectification are always wrong, other forms of objectification can be "necessary or even wonderful features of sexual life."<sup>11</sup> Initially, she lists seven features that may be involved in treating-as-an-object: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> Treating-as-an-object and therefore objectification may involve one or more of these features, and there is no precise rule that specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions for a form of treatment to amount to objectification.<sup>13</sup> However, as Nussbaum's analysis progresses, she concludes that instrumentality, the denial of autonomy, and, to a lesser degree, the denial of subjectivity are particularly important on the normative level, and in a later paper she

9. However, as long as sexually objectifying meanings circulate in society, merely using a woman for sexual purposes will impose sex object status on her, whether the user intends so or not. Therefore, mere instrumentalization is sufficient for sexual objectification, given our sexist social context. See my discussion in Sec. I.

10. Nussbaum, "Objectification," 251, 254. The fact that Nussbaum sometimes talks of "seeing" or "regarding" rather than "treating" a human being as a thing suggests that she is aware of the importance of the attitude that the objectifier has toward the objectified. However, her conceptual analysis of objectification mostly occludes this dimension of it, because of her focus on actual instrumentalization.

11. *Ibid.*, 251.

12. *Ibid.*, 256–57.

13. As Langton has pointed out, "when dealing with a cluster concept, something counts as coming under the concept in case it satisfies a vague 'sufficiently many' of the listed features" ("Autonomy-Denial in Objectification," 228).

identifies mere instrumentalization as the decisive wrong-making feature of wrongful objectification: “Objectification is wrong, to the extent and in the ways that it is, because it is always wrong to treat a human being as a mere means to another’s ends.”<sup>14</sup>

The attraction of Nussbaum’s account clearly lies on the phenomenological level. She is able to show how the instrumental use that men make of women often resembles the use they make of objects: in James Hankinson’s pornographic novels, women’s autonomy and subjectivity do not matter, and their inertness and violability are eroticized; in *Playboy*, their fungibility and commodification are celebrated.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Nussbaum thinks that permissible objectification, such as that described in D. H. Lawrence’s novels, does not involve instrumentalization at all.<sup>16</sup> But this claim is implausible; surely we use and, therefore, instrumentalize our partners in all sexual acts; it is just that according to Nussbaum, in Lawrence, instrumentalization is harmless and morally permissible.<sup>17</sup> Thus when Nussbaum talks about the sort of instrumental use that negates autonomy, she must mean the sort of instrumental use that Kant calls *mere* use: to treat someone as a mere means is to deny their autonomy.<sup>18</sup> It is this conception of morally impermissible objectification as mere instrumentalization that enables Nussbaum to conceive of objectification as a nonmoralized concept, because she can conceive of permissible objectification as permissible instrumentalization.

In my view, this characterization of objectification puts the instrumentalization account on the wrong track, because once morally impermissible objectification is conceived of as mere instrumentalization, the whole analysis of objectification becomes an analysis of the moral requirements of permissible instrumentalization or use. To be sure, this analysis is morally important and philosophically complex, because on Nussbaum’s account, consent is not sufficient for the permissible use of another person; rather, a context of intimacy, symmetry, and mutuality matters too.<sup>19</sup> However, the analysis of instrumentalization in terms of the quality of consent focuses too much on the narrow interpersonal context that defines the relationship between sexual partners, and too little

14. Nussbaum, “Feminism, Virtue, and Objectification,” 51.

15. Nussbaum, “Objectification,” 280, 283.

16. *Ibid.*, 273, 275.

17. On this point, see also Patricia Marino, “The Ethics of Sexual Objectification: Autonomy and Consent,” *Inquiry* 51 (2008): 345–64, at 352.

18. Nussbaum, “Objectification,” 265. I take it that she is aware of it at all times, even though sometimes she writes *instrumentalization* or *use* where *mere instrumentalization* or *mere use* seems required.

19. For a discussion and critique of Nussbaum’s complex position, see Marino, “The Ethics of Sexual Objectification.”

on the wider social context in which gender roles are formed that inform male expectations about women and their sexuality.

To see this, consider Linda LeMoncheck's example of the "unhappy wife," who submits to her husband's drunk advances but feels that she is nothing but a feelingless object for him on which he can call to satisfy his desires. She feels used by her husband, because when it comes to sex he doesn't seem to care about her needs and desires but rather assumes that, as his wife, she should oblige him regardless.<sup>20</sup> What, if anything, makes this a case of sexual objectification? On the instrumentalization account, it just is the fact that the husband uses his wife for his own pleasure without regard to hers. Even though the wife consents to his advances, her consent is insufficient to absolve her husband from moral blame, because it is clear that the context in which he uses her is not characterized by intimacy, symmetry, and mutuality.<sup>21</sup>

On the imposition account, the husband's behavior manifests the existing sexual objectification and reproduces it, because his behavior occurs against the background of social meanings that portray women as sex objects. This is clear in LeMoncheck's description of the husband's attitude; he thinks that his wife ought to oblige because she is his wife, and it is part of her role as his wife to satisfy his sexual desires. The social meanings underpinning the husband's attitude, for example the male sex right, are not produced in private intimate relations, but they are manifested in them and reproduced through their manifestation. In a society in which these social meanings do not circulate, the husband's behavior would not manifest sexual objectification but "merely mere instrumentalization."

Thus there are two distinct harms and wrongs here. The wife would be right to blame her husband, saying, "you're just using me," because he doesn't care about her desires and feelings, and the context of his behavior, their marriage, calls for such intimacy, symmetry, and mutuality.<sup>22</sup> But the wife also can blame her husband for his views of women as the sexual servants of men, which are manifested in his behavior and which harm and wrong her in a distinctive way, independently of the harm and wrong of being merely used: they undermine her autonomy

20. See Linda LeMoncheck, *Dehumanizing Women: Treating Persons as Sex Objects* (Towata, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 8–14.

21. From a Kantian perspective, one may say that it is insufficient not to treat a person as a mere means; one also must treat her as an end in herself, and that may require sharing her ends. See Onora O'Neill, "Between Consenting Adults," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985): 252–77.

22. This contextual characterization of the husband's behavior leaves open the possibility that there may be other contexts in which sexual use does not require intimacy, symmetry, or mutuality. For further discussion, see Marino, "Ethics of Sexual Objectification," 358–361.

and her equal social standing.<sup>23</sup> And this would be true even if the husband never did use her, perhaps because he always falls asleep after making his drunk advances. In the remainder of this essay I will argue that the concept of sexual objectification captures this second harm and wrong, and that it is brought about through the imposition of a social meaning, sex object status. So understood, sexual objectification captures something that eludes the instrumentalization account.

## II

We can understand why the imposition of social meaning is harmful and wrong if we recognize the importance of self-presentation to our agency. In this section I will make the case for this claim and also explain why sexual objectification, understood as the imposition of a social meaning on women, harms their autonomy and equal social standing. In the next two sections I will discuss what exactly sex object status is and how it is imposed on women.

In recent work on the topic, self-presentation has been discussed primarily from the perspective of the individual agent in the context of privacy and shame, where it can be understood in terms of concealment and exposure. Thomas Nagel and David Velleman have shown how all of us routinely create public images of ourselves by selecting which aspects of ourselves we expose to others and which we conceal from them.<sup>24</sup> This selective self-presentation is not dishonest per se, because everyone knows that our public images are carefully constructed in order to present ourselves as targets for social interaction, which requires that others can recognize our public image as an intentional presentation of ourselves to which they can respond. This may mean that we conceal beliefs and desires that would make social interaction difficult or impossible, or that we foreground aspects of our person that help us to project our desired image to others while backgrounding other aspects.<sup>25</sup> It is an important

23. Note that such sexist views are compatible with respect for women's achievements in other spheres. Thus the husband may admire his wife's skills as a lawyer (LeMoncheck, *Dehumanizing Women*, 9). The point is that *when her sexuality is salient* she is objectified. And, as I will argue in Sec. IV, men can make any situation into one in which women's sexuality is salient.

24. See Thomas Nagel, "Concealment and Exposure," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27 (1998): 3–30; J. David Velleman, "The Genesis of Shame," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30 (2001): 27–52.

25. See Nagel's example of the professor who is sexually attracted to a young colleague: their professional relationship depends on his ability to conceal his attraction and her ability to conceal her reaction to the obvious signs ("Concealment and Exposure," 12–13). See also Velleman's example of his son's embarrassment at being seen with his parents because it brings home his continued dependence on them ("The Genesis of Shame," 44–45).



result of this discussion that not being recognized as a self-presenter is an existential threat to our agency:

Not being recognized as a self-presenter would entail not being acknowledged as a potential partner in conversation, cooperation, or even competition and conflict. You thus have a fundamental interest in being recognized as a self-presenting creature, an interest that is more fundamental, in fact, than your interest in presenting any particular public image. Not to be seen as honest or intelligent or attractive would be socially disadvantageous, but not to be seen as a self-presenting creature would be socially disqualifying: it would place you beyond the reach of social intercourse altogether.<sup>26</sup>

Velleman does not elaborate further on the nature of the threat at issue here, but it seems to be a twofold threat. It is a threat to *autonomy*, because the inability to self-present threatens one's ability to make claims on one's own behalf. Moreover, it is a threat to one's *equal social standing* in social interaction. I will say more about these threats below.

I think Nagel and Velleman are right to point to the role of self-presentation in social interaction, but it is important to recognize that our self-presentation does not take place in a vacuum. We present ourselves in many different ways depending on context, and we do that by assuming social roles that are available to us and intelligible to others in the relevant context. Even where we are successful self-presenters, we don't make up social roles from scratch. We may combine a number of these roles in our lives, mold them to the best of our abilities, and make them our own, but we nevertheless rely on the intelligibility of these roles to others, because a life course that does not make reference to any recognizable social role is unrecognizable: it does not make sense to others, it cannot be recognized as valuable by others, and therefore it cannot give us the recognition of others that we need to form and present a coherent image of ourselves.<sup>27</sup> Thus, on the one hand, we have a natural interest in influencing how others see us; on the other hand, how others see us influences how we can see ourselves as being and, therefore, how we aim to present ourselves to others.

If this is right, then opportunities for self-presentation depend on at least two social conditions. First, they depend on our ability to be self-

26. Velleman, "The Genesis of Shame," 37.

27. See Joel Anderson and Axel Honneth, "Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice," in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism*, ed. John Christman and Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Anderson and Honneth argue that it may be impossible or at least extremely costly to pursue a life that cannot be recognized by others, because most of us depend on some form of affirmative recognition of the meaning and value of our chosen life and our ability to live it.



presenters at all. Second, they depend on socially available meanings in terms of which we can present ourselves. I want to argue that the sexual objectification of women limits their opportunities for self-presentation and therefore their autonomous agency and equal social status, by undermining both of these conditions. Where social meanings are imposed on them, sexual objectification directly undermines women's ability to be self-presenters. But even the everyday practices through which these meanings are manifested and reproduced in public and in private indirectly limit the ways in which women can present themselves, because the prevalence of these meanings can marginalize nonsexist meanings. I will focus on the imposition of meanings for now, but I shall return to the consequences of limited socially available meanings toward the end of the essay (Sec. V).

Velleman's discussion of racist social stereotyping offers an example of the imposition of a social meaning: "The target of racist remarks is displayed not just as 'the nigger' or 'the hymie,' but as one who has thus been captured in a socially defined image that leaves no room for self-presentation."<sup>28</sup> Velleman considers two defenses available to the victims of such stereotyping. First, the victims may embrace the stereotype and make it part of their deliberate self-presentation. However, this embrace of the stereotype amounts to a compromise with racism insofar as the victims incorporate the stereotype into their public image in order to defend their status as self-presenters. If this is the only defense available to them, they may be deceived about their actual powers of self-presentation.<sup>29</sup> In fact, it seems to me that embracing a stereotype as part of one's public image may compromise one's status as a self-presenter, even if it does genuinely accord with one's conception of oneself, because it is a stereotype that also is imposed on people and, therefore, undermines one's autonomy and equal social standing by association.<sup>30</sup> Second, victims of stereotyping may try to escape the force of stereotyping by dismissing the perpetrators as potential partners in social interaction. The perpetrators' insults don't count, if they don't count. However, Velleman suggests that stereotyping remarks are often made in public, and the injury to autonomy and equal social standing occurs when third parties witness the powerlessness of the victim of stereotyping in the face of an assault on their agency and equality.<sup>31</sup>

28. Velleman, "The Genesis of Shame," 45. Velleman suggests that the shame felt in response to such remarks is properly understood as a response to the feeling of vulnerability engendered by the loss of the ability to self-present.

29. *Ibid.*, 46.

30. I briefly discuss the question of whether women can embrace sex object status as part of their public image in Sec. V.

31. Velleman, "The Genesis of Shame." In Sec. IV, I suggest that the sexual objectification of women through sexual harassment leads to the same experience of powerlessness.

Perhaps Velleman's characterization of the harm of stereotyping is too strong. It is not clear why being captured in a socially defined image should leave no room, rather than less room, for self-presentation. In that case a third defense is available to victims of social stereotyping. They can try to construct a public image of themselves that negates the image that others may have formed of them already on the basis of the stereotype. To be sure, on this account, victims of stereotyping still are harmed and wronged because their opportunities for self-presentation are restricted, even though they are not fully eradicated. They face additional burdens in realizing their autonomy and equal social standing, because they are singled out for social stereotyping. And this seems to be true more generally in cases where a social meaning is imposed on someone. The imposed meaning does not eradicate the person's self-presentation but rather becomes the most salient aspect of the person's public image, which licenses attitudes or behaviors toward the person that are associated with the imposed meaning.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the manifestation of these attitudes and behaviors toward the person licenses others in seeing her in the same way and therefore reproduces the imposition of the social meaning. This also suggests that not all stereotypes are equally disqualifying, because the severity of the threat that a stereotype poses to its victims' autonomy and equal social standing depends on the attitudes and behaviors that are licensed by its content.<sup>33</sup>

The imposition of a social meaning on a person differs from our ordinary practices of attributing social roles to people that we encounter. For example, if I see someone as a teacher, I do not impose the social meaning of "teacher" on her. Rather, I respond to an aspect of her public image that is part of her deliberate self-presentation. And while my seeing her as a teacher may license certain attitudes and behaviors toward her, she has reason to expect these as part of her professional role and normally won't experience them as an imposition.<sup>34</sup> Of course, I may be mistaken, and the person I see as a teacher in fact is not a teacher. Perhaps some part of her self-presentation has reminded me of a teacher, and I succumbed to a stereotype. In this case my misidentification of her

32. This is very clear in Nussbaum's discussion of *Playboy's* "Women of the Ivy League" issue ("Objectification," 283–86). While the students clearly are sexually objectified, it also does matter that they are women of the Ivy League.

33. This explains why positive stereotypes may be less damaging than negative ones, even though they also may undermine one's self-presentation.

34. Note though that it is possible to be stereotyped as a teacher. In that case, clichés and exaggerations about teachers may be imposed on a teacher in such a way as to undermine her ability to self-present. As we have seen above, such stereotyping may make it more difficult for the teacher to self-present as a teacher, because it makes it more difficult to appropriate the imposed social meaning as her own.

may seem to license certain attitudes and behaviors toward the person that are not in fact licensed. However, note that once the misidentification is cleared up, I no longer will see her as a teacher or display the associated attitudes or behaviors.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, imposed social meanings do not respond to the public images that their victims present. Rather, they represent the attitudes and desires of those who impose them. In Velleman's example, the racists make their victims' race the most salient aspect of their public image regardless of the role that it plays in their own self-presentation. Note that the racists need not be conscious of the fact that it is their attitudes and desires that lead them to direct the racist remarks at their victims, rather than anything about the victims themselves. Nevertheless, this is what makes them *imposed* social meanings. Similarly, men who objectify women make their sexuality the most salient feature of their public image regardless of the role that it plays in their own self-presentation. In cases such as sexual harassment, men need not be conscious of the fact that it is their attitudes and desires that lead them to direct sexist remarks at their victims. However, perhaps one difference between racist stereotyping and sexual objectification is that sexual objectification more often works through media that consciously appeal to men's attitudes and desires, such as men's magazines and pornography. In the remainder of the essay I will discuss in more detail the social meanings that are imposed on women and how they are imposed. Before I move on to this task, I want to explain in general terms how I understand the threat that sexual objectification, considered as the imposition of a social meaning, poses to people's autonomy and equal social standing.

I agree with Nussbaum that sexual objectification denies the autonomy of its victims.<sup>36</sup> However, on the imposition account, this threat to

35. I think that this kind of stereotype may be similar to the one that MacKinnon distinguishes from the imposition of a social meaning that constitutes sexual objectification. On this view, stereotyping "acts as though it's all in the head" (*Feminism Unmodified*, 118). Consequently, all that is needed to overcome it is for stereotypers and stereotyped to give up their mistaken views. In contrast, MacKinnon believes that sexual objectification is more like Velleman's case of racist stereotyping: it enforces the unequal gender roles constituted by male supremacy in the social world, so that significant social change will be necessary in order to overcome women's subordination (*ibid.*, 119).

36. Of course, on Nussbaum's account, autonomy denial is only one of seven features of treating-as-an-object, albeit an important one, especially when it comes to understanding what makes objectification wrong when it is wrong ("Objectification," 257, 265). Lina Papadaki takes this argument further. On her account, objectification is denial of humanity, where humanity is defined very similarly to autonomy as an individual's rational nature and capacity for choice ("What Is Objectification?" 17–18, 32). The problem with this account is that there are many different ways in which humanity can be denied, and it seems phenomenologically implausible to me to characterize all of these ways as objectification.

autonomy takes a very specific form. To see this, it is worthwhile to return briefly to Velleman's account of self-presentation. On this account, we discover our autonomous will when we learn that we can resist our instincts and determine for ourselves which of them to make part of our public image and which to keep private.<sup>37</sup> Over time, this public image comes to define our behavior and makes it intelligible, both to ourselves and to others, issuing in the fundamental interest in being recognized as a self-presenting creature discussed above.<sup>38</sup> Our ability to be recognized as an autonomous agent depends on our ability to be recognized as a self-presenting creature, because a deliberate public image demonstrates that our will governs our actions and social interactions with others. Conversely, not being recognized as a self-presenter undermines our ability to make claims on our own behalf, because only claims that are consistent with our public image are recognizable as ours.<sup>39</sup> Velleman's discussion mostly focuses on how failures of privacy undermine self-presentation, but his example of social stereotyping shows that the violation of our status as self-presenters through the imposition of a social meaning also undermines our autonomy.<sup>40</sup>

So understood, sexual objectification is a threat to women's autonomy, because it invites men (and other women) to see them as sex objects whose worth is defined by men's sexual interests, rather than as self-presenting autonomous agents who make claims on their own behalf and have the right to be recognized as such agents. This threat to autonomy differs from more obvious threats to individual acts of self-determination, but it is at least as serious as these threats, because it attacks women's social standing as autonomous agents that grants them the right to self-determination in the first place. Of course, once women's social standing as autonomous agents is undermined, they also become vulnerable to interference with individual acts of self-determination, because it becomes more difficult to demand respect for their autonomy.<sup>41</sup>

37. See Velleman, "The Genesis of Shame," 30–34.

38. *Ibid.*, 37.

39. Of course, recognizing someone's self-presented public image and their claims does not imply that one has to agree with how they choose to present themselves or with the claims they raise; both may be dishonest, for example. However, such disagreement presupposes that one recognizes their deliberate character.

40. Velleman suggests that violations of privacy that undermine self-presentation (e.g., being the victim of a Peeping Tom) are marginal to the argument of his paper, because they should not occasion shame, which is the proper response to one's failure to manage one's privacy ("The Genesis of Shame," 38). However, he suggests that the victim of racist social stereotyping may feel shame as a response to "the genuine vulnerability of being displayed as less than the master of his self-definition and therefore less than a socially qualified agent" (*ibid.*, 45).

41. The important literature on silencing adds a further dimension to this threat to autonomy which reinforces my argument here. Feminist philosophers such as Jennifer

Sexual objectification poses another, different threat to the equal social standing of women. This standing is undermined when the imposition of sex object status on women represents them as less than the social equals of men. As Jeremy Waldron has pointed out, the assurance of equal social standing to all citizens, which is the goal of any well-ordered society, requires us to reflect on the visible appearance of our public spaces.<sup>42</sup> He asks:

Can we characterize as well-ordered a society decorated—on advertising billboards, subway placards, and innumerable television screens—in ways that demean one large class of its citizens, ways that convey a degrading message about their sexuality, ways that highlight a particular range of opportunities and activities presented as appropriate for them to the exclusion of a large number of other activities and opportunities, or ways that portray as normative a kind of subordination in relationships that is at odds with the idea of an autonomous person working out her own destiny under conditions of justice and dignity?<sup>43</sup>

The answer, clearly, is that we cannot characterize such a sexist society as well-ordered, and the reason for this is that its visual appearance expresses disrespect for women and makes it extremely difficult for them to see themselves as men's social equals. A similar question can be asked about a society's audible appearance when it insistently and repeatedly

Hornsby and Rae Langton have argued along Austinian lines that free speech implies freedom of illocutionary acts, that is, the ability to secure uptake for one's communicative speech acts (see Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 [1993]: 293–330; Hornsby and Langton, "Free Speech and Illocution," *Legal Theory* 4 [1998]: 21–37). For a woman to have free speech in this sense, she must be recognized as a self-presenting autonomous agent who can make claims on her own behalf. For example, she must be able to be understood as refusing sex when she says no. In this context, the feminist objection to pornography is that it can lead to illocutionary disablement, that is, a situation in which a woman's "no" is not understood as a refusal, perhaps because the man's exposure to pornography leads him to believe that when a woman says no to sex, she really means yes (Langton discusses some disturbing evidence to this effect in "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts," 323–26).

42. See Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). In what follows, I draw on some aspects of Waldron's discussion, but I am aware that there are important differences as well as similarities between sexism and racism, and I don't want to suggest that Waldron's analysis of hate speech fully applies to my analysis of sexual objectification. Waldron also refers to equal social standing as dignity (5). Since dignity is a very complex concept, and it is difficult to keep its many connotations under control, I will refrain from using it here and refer to equal social standing throughout.

43. *Ibid.*, 89.

degrades a vulnerable group, such as through the street sexual harassment recorded by the Everyday Sexism Project.<sup>44</sup>

Thus the imposition of sex object status on women represents them as the sexual and social subordinates of men. Moreover, as we shall see in Section IV, sexual objectification has a “pedagogical function.”<sup>45</sup> It socializes men and women into gendered role expectations that teach them to assume their sexual and social roles as superiors and subordinates. The cumulative force of the practices and media of sexual objectification transforms representation into reality. The resulting subordinate social status of women harms and wrongs them as a class. This is a status harm additional to and independent of the harm to autonomy. It means that women do not enjoy equal opportunities to men in many areas of life and are vulnerable to gender-specific harms, including sexual assault and rape.

### III

So far I have suggested that sex object status is imposed on women based on the attitudes and desires of men, and that it is a subordinate social status. But what exactly does it mean to be a sex object, what conception of sexuality does it entail, and how is it imposed on women?

To be a sex object is to be defined by one’s sexual attributes, such as one’s attractiveness and one’s availability for sex. Sex object status is inherently “reductive” in the very specific sense that, as a sex object, one’s sexual attributes are the most salient attributes of one’s person and dominate one’s public image. Note that this is not the same thing as being seen as sexually attractive or as being available for sex. Most of us sometimes want to be seen as sexually attractive to others, and most of us sometimes want to signal our availability for sex. But then we choose to self-present accordingly; we present ourselves as attractively as possible and signal our availability. In contrast, sex object status is an imposed status because the attitudes and desires of others come to define one’s public image. To be an object in this sense means that one’s meaning and value in the eyes of others are determined by their interests and

44. Waldron initially limits his analysis to the visual appearance of society but later acknowledges that its audible appearance also can matter (*ibid.*, 72). For more information on the Everyday Sexism Project, see Laura Bates, *Everyday Sexism* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014). This book draws on the reports of thousands of women recorded on the website <http://www.everydaysexism.com>.

45. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, 91.

values, just as the meaning and value of many ordinary objects are determined by people's interests and values.<sup>46</sup>

The view of women as sex objects is embedded in a particular conception of human sexuality, and sexual objectification reproduces both. This conception of sexuality conceives of male and female sexual desire as complementary and naturalizes both the sexual and social subordination of women and the mechanisms through which it is enforced.<sup>47</sup> If women, considered as sex objects, are the proper objects of male sexual desire, then to be used in order to satisfy that desire must be their proper purpose. At the more benign end of sexual objectification, women are shown as expressing their true nature through serving men's sexual interests. Their own sexual interests are constructed as mirroring those of men. As MacKinnon puts it, commenting on the *Playboy* "standard," "to use a woman sexually does not violate her nature because it expresses her nature; it is what she is *for*."<sup>48</sup> At the more pernicious end, gender inequality itself is eroticized. Violent pornography "sexualizes rape, battery, sexual harassment, prostitution, and child sexual abuse; it thereby celebrates, promotes, authorizes, and legitimizes them."<sup>49</sup> More generally, MacKinnon suggests that pornography aimed at heterosexual men in all its kinds, from *Playboy* to violent hardcore pornography, is one of the main media through which sexual objectification works, because it constructs male and female gender roles on the basis of sexuality. One does not need to agree with this strand of feminism on the whole in order to appreciate this point. Whatever else is true of this pornography, it is surely uncontested that it portrays women as sex objects (I will return to this in Sec. IV).

To be sure, the social meanings that construct women as sex objects compete with other available social meanings; they restrict rather than eradicate women's opportunities for self-presentation, because they can

46. An argument from recent Kant scholarship can illustrate this point: according to Christine Korsgaard's conferral account of value, nothing has unconditional value except rational nature (i.e., humans). Everything else has its value conferred on it by rational nature (i.e., humans). Thus, Kant's argument that becoming the object of someone's sexual desire makes that person into a thing can be read as an argument about how sexual desire changes our mode of valuation rather than about how sexual desire leads to a morally problematic form of use.

47. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to discuss the concept of sexual complementarity in any detail here. Briefly, the assumption of such complementarity may be based on the complementarity of male and female reproductive functions. However, while sexual desire has a natural basis, it also is socially shaped and therefore male and female sexual desire cannot be assumed to be complementary, especially if both are shaped under conditions of social inequality.

48. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 138.

49. *Ibid.*, 171.



be used to make women's sex object status salient and to dominate non-sexist social meanings. Nevertheless, many women self-present successfully as men's equals and autonomous agents on the basis of socially recognizable statuses, roles, and achievements, despite the fact that sometimes they are reduced to sex objects. But these successful women should not blind us to the harms and wrongs that many other women suffer because of the burdens that sexual objectification imposes on them. These burdens do not fall on women accidentally but because men impose them on women, and the fact that some women flourish in spite of them does not render them less unjust.<sup>50</sup> The harm and wrong of sexual objectification resides in the fact that it makes women vulnerable; they can be reduced to sex object status at any time when their sexual attributes are made dominant in their public image. It may happen in the context of sexual relations, like in the example of the unhappy wife, whose husband manifests and thereby reproduces the view that women are sex objects (see Sec. I), but it also may happen in work contexts, where women are diminished in their status as coworkers when male colleagues undermine their authority and confidence through sexist jokes, sexually explicit remarks, or leery stares.

This characterization of sex object status makes clear that it is a subordinate social status. It is obvious that sexual objectification serves men's sexual interests, both because practices of sexual objectification can be pleasurable in themselves and because, if pervasive, they are likely to increase men's sexual access to women. However, it is important to note that sexual objectification also serves men's nonsexual interests in maintaining power over women. The ability to cast women as sex objects enables men to undermine women's roles in many public and private institutions, from workplaces to the political sphere, and to enforce their compliance with their subordinate social roles.

It also makes clear that sexual objectification imposes sex object status on women *qua* women, and therefore concerns women *as a class*. As a result, sexual objectification is a threat to all women's autonomy and equal social standing. In particular, it is not limited to women who conventionally are seen as "attractive" or "sexy." Rather, sexual objectification threatens all women, because all women can be defined by and reduced to their sexual attractiveness and availability and be appraised accordingly, positively or negatively, even though popular media such as advertising or pornography perhaps are more likely to display conventionally attractive and sexy women.<sup>51</sup> To be sure, individual manifesta-

50. On this point, see also Anderson and Honneth, "Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice," 131, and my discussion in Sec. V.

51. In fact, pornography objectifies all women, including disabled women, older women, and pregnant women (see MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 172).

tions of sexual objectification, such as the behavior of the chauvinist husband in the example of the unhappy wife or Nussbaum's example of the *Playboy* feature on Nicollette Sheridan, usually single out individual women. But the views about women and their sexuality that are manifested are views about women *as such*.<sup>52</sup>

#### IV

While Nussbaum's analysis of objectification proceeds through a discussion of mostly literary examples, it is worth remembering that sex object status is imposed on women through many different practices and media. This includes the practices that construct and disseminate the social meanings that characterize women as sex objects and practices that help to reproduce and impose them on women: for example, the everyday sexual harassment of women in public spaces and in the workplace.<sup>53</sup> Media of sexual objectification are all media which portray women as sex objects, such as sexist advertising, music videos, men's magazines, and pornography.<sup>54</sup> Of course, objectifying practices often use objectifying media (e.g., when workers display pornographic materials in the workplace). However, I think it is useful to discuss them separately, if only to stress that sexual objectification is manifested and reproduced in everyday actions as well as through media representations of women as sex objects. Let me begin with street sexual harassment as an example of an objectifying practice, because of the parallels with the racist stereotyping discussed in Section II, and because it illustrates how the sexual objectification of women as a class is manifested and reproduced in individual behavior and affects individual women.<sup>55</sup>

In recent years, feminists have drawn renewed attention to the persistence of widespread sexism and sexual harassment in everyday life and the attempts of women to fight against it, first and foremost through various forms of consciousness-raising, including a Twitter hashtag re-

52. Thus I agree with Nussbaum that in the *Playboy* feature, the represented woman, the actress representing her, and, ultimately, "real-life women, relevantly similar" are all objectified ("Objectification," 284).

53. In what follows, "sexual harassment" always refers to the sexual harassment of women by men.

54. In what follows, "pornography" always refers to pornography aimed at heterosexual men rather than at women or gay men.

55. In this essay I use "sexual harassment" in the broad sense of the term to include everyday forms of harassment that women face in public, rather than in the narrow sense in which it is used in the legal context, where sexual harassment in the workplace is at issue. For a brief discussion of paradigm cases of sexual harassment in these different senses, see Jan Crosthwaite and Graham Priest, "The Definition of Sexual Harassment," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996): 66–82, at 68.

ording incidences of “everyday sexism.”<sup>56</sup> These everyday experiences of women are very instructive for understanding how women are constructed as sex objects and why this is harmful and wrong. Consider, for example, leering, wolf-whistling, sexual innuendo, and sexually explicit remarks, taunts, offers, and threats randomly directed at women in public spaces. All of these behaviors reduce women to sex objects in the eyes of their harassers and invite others to see them in this way. More generally, sexual harassment communicates to women that they lack control over their self-presentation; there is nothing that they can do in order to avoid being reduced to a sex object if the harassers enjoy reducing them to one for their own titillation.

As Jan Crosthwaite and Graham Priest point out, the overarching experience of sexually harassed women is a feeling of powerlessness. Sexual harassment makes women aware of their less powerful status in society and that this social subordination can be expressed through sexual behavior. Moreover, women feel powerless because they feel that they cannot do anything against sexual harassment.<sup>57</sup> Thus manifestations of sexual harassment reproduce the powerlessness on which they depend. We can see why sexual objectification undermines women’s autonomy and equal social standing. Sexual harassment oppresses women as women, through the imposition of a social meaning that threatens their autonomy and reproduces their social inequality. Their vulnerability to sexual violence in particular is the result of their sex object status, but having that status is the result of the continuous imposition of that status on women; sexual harassment “make[s] the victim aware of the presence of the perpetrator and her vulnerability to his sexual appraisal . . . forcing her to be aware of her sexuality as perceived by (some) men and of herself as vulnerable to the sexual predation of men.”<sup>58</sup>

The phenomenology of such everyday sexual harassment reveals something about the way in which sexual objectification produces and reproduces women as sex objects. In particular, sexual harassment presupposes some sense on the part of the harasser that his behavior is appropriate. To be sure, this sense of appropriateness may be tacit, so that the behavior will be accompanied by a faux thrill of transgression, which adds to the titillating force of sexually explicit speech. Nevertheless, everyday sexual objectification depends on socially available meanings of women as sex objects that circulate already and are manifested and reproduced whenever sexual objectification occurs. Men who sexually harass women act on the basis of beliefs about women and sex-

56. In the United Kingdom, many of these efforts are associated with the Everyday Sexism Project (see n. 44).

57. Crosthwaite and Priest, “The Definition of Sexual Harassment,” 73–74.

58. *Ibid.*, 68.

uality, and at the same time they manifest and thereby reproduce these beliefs through their behavior.

Women are portrayed as sex objects in many media, and while the exact meaning they portray differs from medium to medium, what unifies them is the idea that the worth of women is properly determined by their sexual attractiveness and availability to men. Thus sexist advertisements, men's magazines, music videos, and pornography all present women as sex objects. What matters is not that a medium contains sexually explicit material, but that it promotes the view that women are properly valued and treated in terms of their sexual attractiveness and availability. Moreover, this is a sufficient condition for being a medium of sexual objectification; it is not necessary that objectification be intended.

Nevertheless, many feminists have argued that pornography aimed at heterosexual men plays a particularly important role in reproducing sexual objectification.<sup>59</sup> It serves at least two functions. First, if it is habitually used for sexual gratification, it shapes sexual desire; the content of sexual desire is influenced by the sexual roles and sexual relations that are portrayed in pornography.<sup>60</sup> Second, it communicates to its consumers desires, behaviors, and expectations that are appropriate to their sexual roles. These functions are complementary: the fact that pornography is "masturbation material" does not mean that it does not also communicate ideas about the respective roles of men and women.<sup>61</sup> Rather, the fusion of the sexual arousal and satisfaction that it offers with the portrayal of women as men's sexual servants associates sexual experience with subordination. Moreover, pornography stakes a strong claim to show "the truth about sex"<sup>62</sup> in virtue of the very fact that it is very pervasive and shows sexually explicit material. Pornographic images and movies in particular possess a visceral immediacy that other discourses about sexuality lack; its content is there for anyone to see, and

59. The philosophical literature on pornography is enormous. I do not attempt to do it justice here or to adjudicate the many debates about its status as speech, its harm, or how it should be regulated. All I want to do is gesture at how pornography plausibly can be seen as a medium of sexual objectification.

60. To mention one well-known example: the Minneapolis hearings heard evidence that the phenomenon of "throat rapes" of women and gay men increased after the pornographic film *Deep Throat* gained widespread notoriety (see Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, eds., *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997], 68, 214).

61. This is what Waldron calls pornography's "pedagogical function" (*The Harm in Hate Speech*, 91; see also my discussion at the end of Sec. II). The term "masturbation material" is from Catharine MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17.

62. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 171. One does not need to agree with MacKinnon's view about male verificationist ideals in order to see the plausibility of this point.

this makes it more compelling than anything one could be told about it. This “truth” encompasses more than the mechanics of sexual acts, though that may be what consumers of pornography look for; the “truth” about sex also includes the stories that pornography tells, especially the variety focusing on “real amateurs” and “castings” (where women who want to be models or porn stars are made to have sex with “casting agents”): that all women can be talked into sex, bought for sex, or pressured into sex, regardless of what they initially say they want; that all women like all kinds of sex or will agree to all kinds of sex, regardless of what they initially say they like or will agree to; and so on. To be sure, sometimes pornography depicts fantasy, rather than reality, or men being dominated by women, rather than vice versa, but even in these cases it serves men’s sexual interests. It is produced for the purposes of male sexual arousal and satisfaction, and the women depicted in it serve these purposes, regardless of what they do. As a medium, pornography aimed at heterosexual men presents a normative account of sexual relations which constructs women as sexually subservient to men and therefore entrenches their subordinate social status.

In conclusion, all practices and media that participate in the construction of gender roles through sexual objectification undermine women’s opportunities for self-presentation, because they construct what the social status of women is on the basis of men’s interests. To object to these media and practices, then, is to object to objectification. As MacKinnon puts it, in terms similar to my own, “I want to increase women’s power over sexuality, hence over *our social definition* and treatment. I think that means decreasing the pornographers’ power over it.”<sup>63</sup>

## V

As Natasha Walter has pointed out in a recent book on the return of sexism, there is a trend in Western societies for women to embrace their objectification and to experience it as liberating and empowering.<sup>64</sup> And we should be concerned about this trend, if we believe that women should not value themselves primarily in terms of their sexual attractiveness and availability to men, because embracing these social meanings is detrimental to their autonomy and their equal social standing. This is particularly true of young girls and women who are increasingly objectified and encouraged to adopt sexualized self-images early on in life. There can be little doubt that this sexualization of women occurs in part through the same media that directly impose social meanings on women, but it also is en-

63. *Ibid.*, 140, emphasis added.

64. See Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010), 6.

couraged by the circulation of sexist social meanings in general, in both the public and private spheres. However, whereas the imposition of a meaning is a process where views of women propagated in pornography and other media are transferred onto women qua women, the phenomenon under discussion here is more complex. It concerns the ways in which the sexualized roles and identities of women considered as sex objects become attractive to individual women.

Does this trend point to a limitation of the imposition account? If the threat to women's autonomy and equal social standing derives from the imposition of sex object status on women as a class, then the embrace of sex object status may be thought to eliminate this threat. In fact, one may wonder whether the concept of sexual objectification adequately describes this trend at all; wouldn't it be more apt to conceptualize such an embrace as subjectivization? Some of the phenomena that Walter discusses in her book, such as competitions for future topless models drawing huge female crowds in nightclubs and women who see lap dancing or prostitution as expressions of their sexual power over men, suggest such an analysis.<sup>65</sup> In particular, they suggest that there is a trend for women to make their sexual attractiveness central to their self-worth. A full discussion of these phenomena is beyond the scope of this essay, but, in closing, I want to offer some initial reasons for thinking that the imposition account can, in fact, help us to understand the trend that Walter is worried about, even though a different analysis may be required to understand these phenomena fully.

As we have seen in Section II, we self-present by assuming social roles that are available to us and intelligible to others in the relevant context. If practices and media of sexual objectification limit the socially available meanings in terms of which women can present themselves, then they may have little choice but to construct public images that draw on sexist social meanings. This is true especially if many men (and women) will respond positively to these public images in some contexts, and therefore women may experience them as liberating and empowering in these contexts. Nevertheless, the voluntariness of people's choices depends on the quality of available choices, and in a sexist society the prevalence of sexist social meanings may compromise the voluntariness of choice. Therefore, it may be appropriate to think of the phenomena that Walter describes as the result of an indirect imposition of sex object status on women.

Moreover, given my analysis in Section III, it is unsurprising that sex object status licenses the same attitudes and behaviors whether it is imposed or embraced. As a subordinate social status, it threatens women's

65. *Ibid.*, chaps. 1 and 2, respectively.

autonomy and equal social standing in both cases. This is clear in Walter's interviews with several women who work in the sex industry, as lap dancers or prostitutes, and who talk about the power and freedom they experience through the admiration of their clients. The women also note that this power is momentary and superficial, because they are very aware of the fact that on a deeper level a lot of their clients despise them. They admire lap dancers' bodies and sexiness, but they don't admire lap dancers. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that some of the media that encourage women to be topless models or lap dancers specifically appeal to women from challenging socioeconomic backgrounds who they see as having few meaningful opportunities for social mobility. Thus, as a matter of fact, women's choices often may be "fueled more by desperation than liberation."<sup>66</sup> But if women embrace sexualized self-images, because they are encouraged to do so by a socioeconomic structure in which a particular image of "sexy" femininity is a condition of material security, then the conceptual distinction between imposition and embrace of sex object status looks a lot less clear-cut.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, not all women who embrace sexualized self-images do so out of desperation or lack of choice, and some women even may profit from their sex object status and consciously choose to make sexist social meanings a part of their public image. One may think that this is the case with many successful actresses and pop stars who seem to be able to combine a sexualized self-image with high social status. However, as Nussbaum's example of Nicollette Sheridan's *Playboy* photos shows,<sup>68</sup> these celebrities remain vulnerable to attacks that reduce them to their sex object status. Presumably, actresses, pop stars, and other celebrities learn to live with these attacks or to ignore them, but their persistence shows that it remains difficult for women to defend their equal social standing when they adopt sexualized self-images. At the same time, successful women who incorporate sexist social meanings into their public images may help to reproduce these meanings and become complicit in the reproduction of the social context in which sexual objectification occurs.

Finally, isn't it self-defeating for women to seek empowerment and liberation through the adoption of a self-image that makes their self-worth dependent upon men's appraisal of their sexual attractiveness and availability for sex? Self-worth requires the recognition of one's achievements in pursuing an autonomously chosen conception of the good and

66. *Ibid.*, 35.

67. I am not suggesting that women necessarily make these decisions consciously. Decisions about dress, makeup, mannerisms, and speech are made on the basis of conventions that are deeply embedded in class-specific socialization processes.

68. See Nussbaum, "Objectification," 253.



of one's equal social standing, and both are eroded if the sexist social meanings that are prevalent in Western societies limit women's opportunities for self-presentation and encourage them to embrace a sexualized public image. Just as Velleman's victim of social stereotyping cannot embrace the stereotype without making a compromise with racism (see Sec. II), women should be wary of embracing the sexualized self-images that they are encouraged to embrace. The association with imposed social meanings may undermine their status as autonomous self-presenters who have equal social standing to men, regardless of the voluntariness of their own choices.

## VI

In this essay I have argued that we should prefer the imposition account of sexual objectification over Nussbaum's instrumentalization account, which has received much attention in recent years. I began with an argument against Nussbaum's instrumentalization account, showing that it does not explain the relationship between instrumentalization and the processes of social stereotyping of women that make this instrumentalization possible (Sec. I). Next, I developed an imposition account through a contrast between imposition and self-presentation and discussions of the content and media of sexual objectification (Secs. II–IV). Finally, I offered some tentative thoughts about a possible limitation of this account (Sec. V). I have argued that the imposition account identifies a distinctive harm and wrong to women that undermines their autonomy and equal social standing even in the absence of actual instrumentalization, which is the focus of the instrumentalization account, and that practices and media of sexual objectification should be morally criticized on that basis. Unfortunately, I do not have space to discuss the question of whether the harms and wrongs of sexual objectification identified here justify the legal regulation or prohibition of media of sexual objectification, such as pornography, but it is worth noting that the imposition account could justify such regulation or prohibition independently of empirical arguments about whether women are, as a matter of fact, instrumentalized subsequent to their objectification, because it criticizes sexual objectification for undermining women's equal opportunity to exercise their autonomy and their equal social standing, which is a status harm.<sup>69</sup>

69. Here I agree with Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*.