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Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification.

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Langton's *Sexual Solipsism* collects fifteen papers, two previously unpublished, on feminist philosophy, addressing the issues of pornography and objectification. To make her arguments she brings in a wide variety of approaches, including ethical theory, philosophy of language, political philosophy, and epistemology. Her work sharply criticizes liberal defenses of pornography, most prominently, Ronald Dworkin's, but it also engages the work of other philosophers in more congenial ways, discussing and sharing ideas, and differing with them—Korsgaard, Haslanger, Nussbaum, and Butler are among the more well-known names. The recurring inspiration for Langton is the work of Catharine MacKinnon, the Michigan Law professor whose feminist writing and anti-pornography work has gained a great deal of attention. While Langton's style is far more analytical and less didactic than MacKinnon's, much of this book can be seen as clearing conceptual space to show how MacKinnon's claims about pornography, the subordination of women and objectification could possibly be true.

It is a remarkable feature of Langton's discussion of pornography that her main example is the movie *Deep Throat*, released in 1972, and that except in a few footnotes, she barely mentions the nature of pornography released in the last thirty-five years. If her aim were to put together an empirical argument about the nature of pornography and its social effects, then this would be a serious fault of the book. But her major goal in her discussion of pornography is to show that a certain kind of argument against pornography is possible, and to show how that argument could be formulated if it were to be made. So it is a highly abstract, hypothetical approach; and even if it is successful, it leaves a great deal of work still to be done in making the argument against the freedom of access to pornography.

The first eight papers spell out Langton's approach to the anti-pornography argument and defend it against criticisms. The basic contentions are that pornography subordinates women and that pornography silences women, and so it should not be protected by law. These are not to be understood as (simply) causal claims, but rather constitutive claims about the nature of pornography. Langton uses Austin's speech act theory to defend these claims, and her use of the theory is sophisticated. If some thought that MacKinnon's approach was obviously conceptually confused, Langton has at least made a plausible case that this is not true. There are ways to understand MacKinnon which apparently make sense, and furthermore, it is possible to see how there could be

evidence for the claims. Langton does not lay out relevant evidence systematically, but she uses anecdote and example to at least give a sense of how the justification of them might go.

As an example of a subordinating speech act, gives a South African legislator saying ‘Blacks are not permitted to vote’. This highlights that the speaker, in order to accomplish a subordinating speech act, must have authority. One of the central requirements for this theory is to spell out what kind of authority is necessary, and to show that pornographers have it. That pornographers possess the requisite authority might seem doubtful, given that they have low social status and that consequently any claims they make about gender relations would not be taken very seriously. Langton addresses an argument against MacKinnon by Judith Butler that pornography can’t subordinate or silence women because it does not have the divine authority MacKinnon attributes to it. Langton argues that it does not need divine power in order to serve the social functions she claims for it. In a reply to work by Leslie Green on similar issues, Langton again clarifies her position by saying that for silencing and subordinating to occur, it is necessary only for there to be agreement as to what pornography says in local communities, and there is some evidence that pornography does affect how people think about women. So Langton preserves the coherence of MacKinnon’s theory as possibly true. Yet the reader is left wondering what it would take to prove or disprove it.

Despite the first eight papers on the subject of pornography in this collection, Langton says little to address why she focuses on pornography as a form of women’s subordination, and how we need to assess the role of other parts of culture. The issue is raised implicitly in her discussion of the authority of pornography, but there’s little to spell out how to compare it with other parts of popular culture, the news media, the children’s doll industry, music videos, computer games, and now the internet. Of course, there are large debates about how to interpret the influence of different parts of modern culture on the status of women, and maybe it was wise of Langton to keep the discussion of the social science literature to a few footnotes, so as to avoid getting swept up in that debate. Nevertheless, this narrowness makes it difficult to see how her approach might mesh with a wider cultural and political analysis which would lead to a consistent set of regulations and reforms.

Langton’s discussion of sexual objectification and alienation involves a more exploratory approach than her work on pornography. The papers on the topic here often use Nussbaum’s 1995 paper on objectification as a starting point, and often bring in MacKinnon again. The papers, especially in their discussion of epistemology, supplement her main anti-pornography argument in the claims it advances about women. Langton argues that although in a sense pornography constructs women, the claims about women in that construction are false, and she relates this to some recent discussions in feminist epistemology, especially about whether being objective should be a feminist goal. Her discussion of the two forms of sexual solipsism, as she idiosyncratically calls

objectification, are especially provocative. The two forms are treating people as things, which is typically seen as dehumanization; and treating things as people, which is typified by men masturbating to pornography. Her two papers on these solipsisms are meandering and meditative, and at the same time philosophical; they include extended discussions of literature, e.g., Ian McEwan's novel *The Innocent* and a portion of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. The first of these two papers has a wide-ranging discussion of objectification, covers Kant on love and friendship, Strawson's discussion of taking the objective stance to others, Scruton's views on sadomasochism, and some existential thought. The second explores the nature of possessive love and its relation to solipsism, especially through an examination of Marcel's love of Albertine in Proust's novel. Both papers are unusual and ambitious approaches to their subjects, and they will frustrate readers looking for a simple main defended thesis, although there contain much rich discussion.

This collection of Langton's work in feminist philosophy will give readers unfamiliar with the literature an entry into the debates. Her own distinctive ideas, in providing a conceptual framework with which to make sense of MacKinnon's provocative claims, are spelled out carefully. While many readers will remain unconvinced by the big picture being offered, this work not only provides a challenge to those who believe MacKinnon's ideas are confused, but also will lead to new avenues of thought and debate—indeed, it has already done so. Langton's work on objectification and sexual solipsism presents less of a challenge and more of an enticement to enter into the debate, since while this is an area that has already been explored by many others philosophers, it is central to any philosophical discussion of sexuality, and it is no simple task to discover the best analysis of objectification. Langton's work will surely stimulate further important research on this topic.

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