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How to do things with Pornography by Nancy Bauer (review)

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Nancy Bauer, *How to do things with Pornography*, Harvard University Press, 2015

Nancy Bauer's *How to do things with Pornography* is a difficult to review book. It sits in a somewhat liminal location somewhere between monograph and thematic collection. Bauer takes the reader on an intellectual journey that crosses a number of philosophical sub-disciplines but also moves between philosophical writing for a general audience and more technical writing exploring the same themes.

As the title suggests, Austin's *How to do things with words* and the uses of various feminist philosophers of language have put Austin's ideas to be central to the book. Bauer argues for an interpretation of Austin much more radical than that often given to him in contemporary philosophy of language, and suggests that it is precisely because of a widespread embrace of the more common conservative reading of *How to do things with words* and the general development of "speech act theory" post Austin that the development of Catherine MacKinnon's claim that pornography silences women has been unsatisfactory.

But Austin and the philosophical (mis)uses to which his ideas have been put are not the only central figures in contemporary philosophical discussions of women's sexuality critiqued by Bauer. In her chapter on objectification she takes on Nussbaum's classic article in which she attempts to provide an exhaustive accounting of types of objectification, and then provides an account of which forms are morally objectionable. This whole approach, Bauer argues, misses out on an essential component of the concept of objectification in feminist analysis, which is that possessing the concept changes how you see the world. Readers familiar with L. A. Paul's work on transformative experiences will recognize the similarities to the phenomena Bauer is describing.

Part of Bauer's underlying concern with Nussbaum's work are the tensions inherent in being a feminist philosopher, a subject which she also explored in her 2001 book *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*. For Bauer the philosophical stance is inherently one that aims at neutrality — a pursuit of truth, regardless of where that takes you. This is not to say that actual philosophers in practice are neutral, or even have adopted methods that plausibly would aim at such neutrality, but just that the goal of neutrality is part of the philosophical enterprise as she understands it. In contrast, being a feminist is to adopt a political stance, even in its most minimal form as the "radical belief that women

are people” (Marie Shear). It is to adopt a way of seeing the world which is not open to all possibilities.

Nussbaum’s attempt to provide a definition of objectification is philosophical in its method, and in that, argues Bauer, it inevitably falls short of the concept as introduced and understood by feminist thinkers. For the feminist, objectification is by its nature bad, and to see something as a case of objectification is *ipso facto* to appraise it morally and find it lacking.

Despite this felt tension and frank acknowledgement of it, Bauer is clearly engaged in a philosophical enterprise. She starts the book not with the analysis of Austin alluded to above, nor with discussion of Nussbaum, but by turning her clear philosophical eye to the sexual experiences of college aged women in the US. She observes that there is plenty of judgment of “hook up culture” in the media, but little close attention to the motivations of the participants, and even less attention to the experience of women in particular. Bauer starts with her own puzzlement: why would these confident and accomplished young women enter again and again into a casual sexual encounter centred around un-reciprocated performances of fellatio? What exactly is in it for them?

Bauer is not engaged in a sociological study of women aged 18–25. Rather she is reflecting on the sorts of things young women say in her classes and to her as a mother of a peer, and reflecting, in the tradition of both analytic philosophy and feminist theorizing, on what those sorts of utterances reveal about the society in which those young women are embedded. Her foil is a certain kind of ‘post-feminist’ theory, on which these young women, accomplished, independent, and ambitious as they are, no longer need feminism.

Bauer argues that they do still need feminism—that equality still eludes even these privileged, accomplished and ambitious women—and that this can be seen perhaps most clearly in their sexual relationships. Understanding the appeal of seemingly one-sided hook-ups requires us to return to de Beauvoir. One might think that heterosexual relationships had progressed since the publication of the *The Second Sex*, but from Bauer’s point of view the progression is largely at a superficial level. Men and women are still splitting the difference when it comes to the inherent difficulty of experiencing oneself as both subject and object, with women agreeing to play the role of sexual objects to men’s sexual subjects. Nor should we be particularly surprised by this. De Beauvoir is quite clear that the role of sexual object comes with numerous benefits for women.

Bauer explores this in great detail in her chapters on the allure of self-objectification and on Lady Gaga . It is precisely because the role of object bestows upon young women an intoxicating sense of their own sexual power—even if they don't exercise that power—that they continue to participate. The young men get an orgasm, and the young women get the rush of being able to walk away and leave him hanging.

For Bauer the practice of genuine feminist philosophy requires that one use your experiences of the world to ground philosophical inquiry while allowing that inquiry to transform your understanding of your experience (ix-x). Her critique of contemporary writing about pornography, objectification, and 'hook-up' culture is at the most basic level that it falls short on both grounds. The methodological status quo for thinking about these issues among feminist philosophers is, she argues, fundamentally flawed. Her goal for *How to do things with Pornography* is primarily to show what goes wrong in this way of thinking about things, though the book is not without positive theorizing.

There is something strange, in Bauer's view, about the general acceptance among feminists of the US legal system's treatment of pornography—and other visual media—as a form of speech, as if this was not just a legal contrivance but a decisively established philosophical analysis. The dispute about the role of 'uptake' in successful illocution, or communication; the staunch avoidance of attention to perlocutionary consequences; and the lack of attention to philosophical work on the rhetorical impact of photography and film are all consequences of this uncritical acceptance.

What is the relationship between the quest for knowledge of the thing itself, or things in themselves, and human sexual desire? What sort of epistemological wish, if any, is involved in the desire to gaze at pornographic photographs and films? Whatever answer one might be inclined to propose, it is clear that this wish cannot be identified or accounted for simply by the idea that pornography is a kind of speech. One wants to ask: who is doing the speaking? The subjects of the photographs? (And are they subjects or objects—or both?) The pornographers? And what exactly is being said? And to whom? And why are people so aroused by looking at *photographs* and *films* of other people's naked bodies and their sexually explicit activity? (85)

The first two chapters of the book replicate two pieces Bauer wrote for a general audience, "Pornutopia" and "Lady Power". Bauer's goal in these pieces is primarily to draw our attention to our lived experience as sexual beings, and contrast this experience with common theorizing about this experience. In "Pornutopia" both the idea that pornography

is not something that ‘decent’ people have interest in or find arousing (a line of thought found in the report of the famous Meese commission on pornography and in much feminist theorizing) and the idea that while we all find some pornography arousing we should inhabit a sense of deep shame about this arousal (a view advocated by Andrea Dworkin) are held up to scrutiny. The problem with the Meesian view is that we all, at least sometimes with some people, find objectification arousing. The problem with Dworkin’s view is that it is soul crushing.

Feminist philosophers, Bauer suggests, have an abiding faith that reason can be used to destroy desire. That is, they take it for granted that we come to properly understand objectification and what is wrong with it, then pornography will lose its power to arouse us. But this is to fail to understand how pornography operates. Within the *pornutopia* there is no space for the concept of objectification, because in porn everyone is desired by everyone who they desire, and in gratifying your own desires you automatically gratify the desires of others as well.

This same criticism lies at the heart of Bauer’s scholarly critique of Martha Nussbaum’s well known account of objectification. Nussbaum’s listing of the various forms of objectification, carefully distinguishing of one from another, and acknowledgement that some forms of objectification can be delightful, misses the point says Bauer. The concept of objectification, she argues, serves feminists by transforming their understanding of certain experiences. With the concept in hand one can transition from moving through the world uncomfortably to identifying the source of your discomfort.

The main problem with the feminist treatments of objectification and pornography in Bauer’s view is that they fail to account for our enjoyment of either — of the happiness that one can get from playing by the rules. De Beauvoir observation that men and women have agreed to ‘split the difference’ when it comes to our phenomenological experience of ourselves as both subject and object, with men taking on the role of sexual subjects, and women the role of sexual objects, is salient here. de Beauvoir explains the powerful allure of self-objectification. By playing the role of object, women can exploit their own sexual power as objects for pleasure—and that pleasure is real. The alternative—what de Beauvoir calls an ‘authentically assumed existence’ is hard, and among other things, it requires both material and psychological means that women lacked in de Beauvoir’s day and, albeit to a lesser extent, continue to lack now. The incoherent striving to be an object persists—and is intractable—because the

system works, more or less. Women have achieved much great parity with men than they had in de Beauvoir's day, but their physical vulnerability remains. Self-objectification is a risk reduction strategy—by objectifying ourselves we avoid something worse. And, as de Beauvoir was aware, the line between self-objectification and full personhood is whisper thin.

What about Austin? On the usual reading of Austin by analytic philosophers of language, *How to do things with words* inaugurates a new sub-discipline within the philosophy of language, the study of what is usually called pragmatics. On this 'standard' reading, Austin's discussion is to be understood as leaving the usual study of syntax and semantics untouched, its practices endorsed, and as advocating merely that philosophers turn their attention also to the use of language in the wild, as it were. Bauer points out that if this is the correct reading of Austin then *How to do things with words* is unique among his writings. In every other area of philosophy on which Austin wrote he advocates nothing less than a complete upheaval of the sub-discipline, "and yet curiously, *Words* is routinely taken "straight", as though here—and only here—Austin was perfectly content to till the same old philosophical soil and wished merely to draw attention to some adjacent virgin land"(55). In contrast, Bauer reads Austin's ambitions to be as radical here as they are everywhere else. In *Words* she argues, Austin accuses his fellow philosophers of not understanding the first thing about language.

On Bauer's reading of Austin he asks us to look anew at language, and at our history of philosophizing about language, and aims to point out the absurdity of imagining that words "bespeak themselves"—that they bear their meanings and truth conditions and *nothing else* openly for all to see; independent of the people who speak them, the people who hear them, and the histories and circumstances of their speakings. Austin, Bauer suggests, is arguing that our ability to *mean* things with our words is a consequence of our ability to *do* things with them. This is of course precisely the reverse of the standard picture, on which it is the meaning of words and sentences—the semantic content of language—that is a precondition for pragmatics.

Understood this way, Austin's critique of philosophy of language is structurally similar to Bauer's critique of feminist philosophy: Austin charges us with failing to pay sufficient attention to our experiences of using language in the world. Traditional philosophical theorizing about language, even that falling under the heading of pragmatics, suffers from a disconnect with the practical realities of using a language. And

contemporary feminist theorizing suffers from an disconnect with the practical realities of women's lives. In particular, on standard feminist understandings of sexual objectification and pornography, the day to day experiences of women (and men) remain something of a mystery.

The last three chapters of the book turn to Bauer's positive and programmatic views. In 'On Philosophical Authority', she argues that our failure to pay attention to the experience of being a language user extends to philosophy itself, and in particular that we have failed to pay any attention to what is required for philosophical speech to be effective. The profession encourages writing, Bauer suggests, 'as though the sheer rationality of our ideas and argumentation should be enough to effect change' (117). This is, she argues, patently not true. Instead we must recognize that whatever cultural authority we have is to be found in our power to incite interest in thinking, and when we do not write with this in mind we abrogate that authority, and with it the ability to do things with philosophical speech.

In 'Getting things right' Bauer turns her attention to the issue of progress and diversity in the profession. The central thesis of this chapter is that both the demographic homogeneity of professional philosophy and the failure of philosophy to make much of a specific kind of progress are interrelated. Bauer's particular target here is the view, advocated by Timothy Williamson, on which philosophy, like science, is and ought to be in the business of theory-making *and nothing else*. Whatever the merits of theory-making—and Bauer is clear that it has merits—we ought also, and perhaps more centrally, be concerned with the kind of progress that results when people work to make explicit their most deeply held assumptions and subject them to scrutiny (136). Focus on theory promotes a gap between philosophical discourse and the way in which people speak and experience the phenomena about which we theorize. As an example, Bauer asks us to reflect on the dominant understanding feminist metaphysicians have of gender as a product of social forces. We don't, Bauer notes, reflect very much on how difficult it is, even for us, to actually live this view, or on how much it fails to easily mesh with our experience of our own gendered bodies. This is not to say that we should not theorize about gender, or that the idea that gender is a social construction is wrong. Rather Bauer is calling us to care about bridging the gap between theory and experience. But this is something that neither the scientific model of philosophy advocated by Williamson nor the 'great man' model of philosophy which is seen by Williamson as the salient alternative make

space for. We need, Bauer argues, to make space for voices that are neither great men—that is to say white men of a certain class—nor foot soldiers in a collective enterprise of philosophical theory-making. In doing so, she suggests, we will make space both for philosophical progress of the human kind, and for a more diverse range of philosophical voices.

Finally, in ‘Reel Girls and Real Girls: What becomes of women on film?’, Bauer returns to pornography, this time with the focus on the ‘look and see’ approach to philosophical theorizing, as advocated by Austin, Stanley Cavell, and Wittgenstein. In particular, Bauer urges us to take seriously that large amounts of pornography is not something done with speech, but with film, that is, with images. What Cavell teaches us, Bauer suggests, is that we must pay attention to the evocative and expressive powers of film, and in particular to the very real desires and pleasures we experience as viewers. These powers can obviously be used to objectify. But what Bauer argues in this last chapter, following Cavell, is that it is film itself which is best situated to reflect upon and call into question its own power to objectify.

The central theme of Bauer’s book is now perhaps obvious—whether our concern is with pornography, objectification, language, or philosophy itself, Bauer calls for us to attend to our experiences as sexual creatures, as women and men, as speakers and hearers, as viewers and makers of film, as philosophers and as people in the world. We must allow those experiences to interact with and shape our theorizing. We must also live with the threat that to do so will radically alter our theories.

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