TWO NOTIONS OF OBJECTIFICATION

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This essay aims to compare two notions of objectification: on the one hand, Buber's distinction between I-thou relations (which he models on the appropriate treatment of humans) and I-it relations (which he models on the treatment of objects),[1] and on the other hand, the contemporary notion of objectification. When discussing Buber's notion of objectification one can rely, of course, on Buber's work. Notwithstanding the common use of the contemporary notion, however, it has received relatively little scholarly attention and analysis till now. I will mostly rely here on Martha Nussbaum's seminal and pioneering "Objectification," where she suggests a very helpful analysis of the notion and its uses.[2]

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Perhaps the most noticeable difference between the notions has to do with their basic features. Nussbaum presents "seven distinct ways of behaving introduced by the term": (1) Instrumentality—using others as a means; (2) Denial of autonomy; (3) Inertness—treating others as lacking agency or activity; (4) Fungibility—treating others as interchangeable; (5) Violability—treating others as lacking boundary integrity, or as such that it is allowed to break or harm; (6) Ownership—treating others as such that can belong to one; and (7) Denial of subjectivity.[3] Nussbaum does not consider this list exhaustive,[4] and I believe that at least two more features should be added. The first is denial of rationality: people are frequently distinguished from objects by the ability to think. The second is worth: people are usually taken to have certain a priori worth or importance simply by virtue of their being human. This is not so with objects, which are viewed as less important than human beings.

Buber's list of features is similar to the modern one in some aspects. Thus, he too discusses instrumentality[5] and denial of autonomy.[6] However, he does not mention the treatment of others as inert, as fungible, as violable, as owned and as lacking subjectivity, rationality and importance. On the other hand, he men-

tions other features that do not appear in the contemporary list: non-reciprocity;[7] relating through the past rather than the present;[8] acting through rules, laws, and set procedures and norms rather than spontaneously;[9] and relating to others with only part (rather than the whole) of one's being.[10]

Part of the difference between these two lists is not coincidental. Buber's orientation is primarily spiritual-emotional, and he calls for a connected, spontaneous, dynamic, and open attitude to the world and its beings. The contemporary account, on the other hand, is primarily moved by ethical-legalistic concerns, and hence mainly demands from individuals not to harm each other, and not much more than that. Moreover, highly informed by liberal presuppositions, it is atomistic and individualist in nature. Hence, relating to others through the past rather than the future, or with part rather than the whole of one's being, or through rules, laws, and set procedures, would not be considered objectifying in the modern account. For Buber, in contrast, relating to others through set laws and procedures, or with only part of one's being, or through the past rather than the future, may hinder the open, connective and spontaneous spiritual relation that he is aiming for. On the other hand, relating to others as lacking in rationality, which is more likely to lead to harm in a modern transactional world, will be objectifying for the contemporary account, but not for Buber's.

Another significant difference between the two accounts is that the contemporary one poses a much lighter challenge to those who wish to refrain from objectifying than does Buber's. According to the contemporary notion, treating people as people does not mean that they will not be treated, to a certain extent, also as objects. For example, we can use others as instruments to a certain extent without objectifying them. They should not be treated as a means only, but treating them instrumentally to a certain degree need not objectify them. The same is true of treating others as inert, i.e., as lacking agency or activity, to some

degree. And because community life requires compromises, some painful and inescapable, we expect people interacting with others to curb their autonomy in various ways. Likewise, although we take each and every person to be unique in an important way, we also understand almost everyone as fungible in some respects and to some extent; if the plumber who usually helps us does not manage to fix the problem with our pipes, we are likely to look for another plumber.[11] Furthermore, some non-objectifying ways we treat others bear the characteristics of ownership. Many feel that, when there is reciprocity in the relationship, restricting to some extent one's spouse's behavior (for example, demanding sexual fidelity) and directing his or her activities (for example, requesting that he or she accompany one to the cinema or concert), need not be objectification. The same is true of ignoring or disallowing the expression of some aspects of people's subjectivity, or of not relating at all times only or even mostly to people's rationality. And while treating people as though they were completely lacking in importance or worth would objectify them, we are not expected to treat all people, in all circumstances, as having the same—and the utmost—importance and worth.

Thus, in the contemporary understanding of objectification, the mere presence of a behavior typical of the treatment of objects when treating human beings is no indication that we have objectified them; and for objectification to cease, the characteristics noted above do not have to be completely absent. The existence of objectification rests not on the mere presence of the features, but on their presence beyond a certain degree. Concomitantly, for objectification to occur, an objectifying feature need not occur to its highest degree. It must only exceed the degree appropriate for human beings. One need not deny one's spouse's autonomy completely in order to objectify her or him; nor must one use one's friends entirely as a means, disregard their subjectivity completely, or treat them as totally inert to objectify them.

The contemporary account presents more reasonable standards to those who want to refrain from objectifying also in its distinction between those who are very close to us and those who are less so. Thus, for example, people are expected to treat their close family and friends as significantly less fungible than, say, co-workers in another department. Similarly, a certain degree of not minding another's subjectivity, or treating as unimportant, may be objectifying for a family member but not a complete stranger. We may not deny, of course, the subjectivity of anyone, nor treat anyone as completely unimportant; but some differentiation according to closeness is considered legitimate. Moreover, the contemporary account also minds the contexts of our activities. In some contexts (e.g., lovers discussing how to balance their relationship with their careers) treating others as active beings, or minding other's rationality, is required, and failing to do so might objectify them, but in other contexts (e.g., lovers caressing each other) it would not.

Buber's account poses a much harsher challenge to those who want to refrain from objectifying. First, unlike the contemporary account, Buber views even a low degree of any of the features of objectification as constituting objectification. Second, for him, non-objectification is a state where not even one of the objectifying features appears. An I-thou mentality that is, say, complete, non-instrumental, and free, but nevertheless based on the past, is impossible. Third, unlike the contemporary account, Buber does not distinguish between friends and complete strangers, and among contexts, and seems to require from us the same degree of non-objectifying behavior toward all people and in all circumstances. In all these ways, his version of non-objectification seems exceedingly difficult to achieve and maintain, indeed almost unrealistic. Buber himself seems to accept this, since he points out that the I-thou is not achieved most of the time, and that when it is achieved one cannot remain in that state for long.[12] Occasional lapses into the I-thou, however, help inform and enrich our usual I-it lives and enable us to live them better.[13]

These dissimilarities relate to a more general difference in orientation between the two accounts. Buber's account is, to a significant extent, utopist; he does not present it as a program that can be realized by most people in the near future. His discussion may even seem to imply that he does not expect that it would be fully realized in any future, although he does

think that it could be realized partly, and more than it is now. Perhaps he sees it as a regulative ideal. The contemporary understanding of objectification, on the other hand, presents non-objectification as realizable. It requires, of course, some effort; but it is expected that people will invest this effort, and refrain from objectifying. Those who fail to achieve it, and objectify, are morally condemned. Hence the ideals of the contemporary account are not presented as too difficult, or almost impossible, to achieve.

Does the utopian nature of Buber's notion lead him to accept that objectification is legitimate? In one sense, it would seem that he does not accept the legitimacy of objectification; he does not think that living in the I-it dimension is good, a fortiori desirable. However, he does accept that one cannot be in I-thou relations most of the time, and may even be interpreted as distinguishing between two types of the I-it. One type, which aims toward the I-thou, and is moderated and informed by occasional lapses into it, is taken to be better than the other type, which is not "softened" and informed by the I-thou. Buber perhaps views the first type of I-it as legitimate objectification and, relatively to the second type, as even desirable. Since his notion of non-objectification is almost impossible to attain, Buber probably views many cases of its non-attainment as non-condemnable, and perhaps even legitimate, even if not desirable.

Relying on the discussion above, we would expect the contemporary notion of objectification to be, in contrast to the Buberian one, purely negative. This is the way it is indeed almost always employed: in the common and normal use of the term, the negative moral appraisal is inherent to the notion "objectification," so that adding the adjective "bad" or "wrong" to it is redundant, and describing an instance of objectification as "good," "legitimate," or "morally desirable" is contradictory or confusing. Nussbaum, however, suggests that this need not be so. Except Buber, Nussbaum—following Cass Sunstein—is the only author of whom I am aware who has argued that some acts of objectification may be morally permissible.[14] To substantiate her point, Nussbaum presents, for example, cases from D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, where,

she argues, some forms of objectification are helpful, pleasing, liberating, and carry a positive, rather than a negative, moral value.[15] Cases of objectification that may be regarded as desirable or legitimate are those that are close to non-objectification in that they do not incorporate some or many of the features of objectification, and those that they do incorporate appear to a low degree. This makes contemporary "objectification" into a descriptive notion, which can be evaluated as either morally bad or morally good. For Nussbaum, then, we should distinguish between non-objectifying behavior, morally permissible (or even commendable) objectifying behavior, and morally wrong objectifying behavior.

Accepting this would not frustrate the point of the contemporary notion, since it still presupposes that many, almost all cases of objectification are morally wrong and should be condemned, and a clear difference is drawn between the few interesting and important cases where objectification is acceptable or even desirable, and the multitude of cases where they are not.

Although both Buber and Nussbaum suggest that objectification may, in some cases, be acceptable, the difference between them should be underlined: for Nussbaum some cases of objectification are not only legitimate, but even desirable, and better—in those specific circumstances—than if objectification had not taken place. When choosing whether to objectify or not, in those circumstances, those particular acts of objectification should have been opted for, since they allow one to achieve positive moral results that are not likely to have been achieved otherwise. With Buber things are different: some cases of objectification are perhaps legitimate and acceptable, since they are inescapable. But they are not desirable, and if the alternative were viable, they should have not been opted for. Buber sees them as acceptable, and certainly preferable to the alternative of I-it relations that are not informed and moderated by the I-thou. But they are never more than that.

Another interesting difference between Buber's notion of objectification and the contemporary one has to do with self-objectification, i.e., the affect of the objectification on the objectifier. In the contemporary discourse, no such affect is discussed. Probably because of

its focus on preventing harm to victims and its legalistic orientation, the modern discussion hardly deals with cases of self-objectification. The objectifier and the objectified, or the victimizer and the victim, are strongly distinguished in this discourse, and the main concern is for the objectified party and the harm done to her or him. The interest in the affect of the objectification on the victimizer, when such interest is present at all, usually focuses on the legal punishment or the social reprimand to which the objectifier should be exposed.

Buber, on the other hand, inserts a reflexive element into his presentation of objectification, taking it to affect the objectifier no less than the objectified.[16] Because of this reflexive element in Buber's discussion of objectification, he accepts self-objectification, moreover believes that it is a necessary part of the objectification, since it appears along with any instance of objectifying others. To him, when I treat you in accordance with procedures, I work with procedures. When I relate to only part of you, I relate with only part of myself.[17] And when I treat you as an object, I make myself an object as well. The reflexive element in Buber's objectification, and the interest not only in the objectified party, but also, and perhaps even principally, in the objectifier, are again more typical of spiritual and religious discussions, where performing certain acts is a sign, and a cause, for impediments in one's spiritual development. Buber's interest in what the objectification does to the objectifier has to do also with another difference between his account and the modern one: his basic understanding of people and society is not atomistic, and he does not presuppose, as in the modern account, independent entities that operate on each other. He understands the relation as prior to the individuals, moreover as constituting them.[18]

Who are the addressees of objectification? Interestingly, Buber believes that we should relate with I-thou relations to all beings and things, including objects (e.g., trees). We should see them, too, as unique, special, open, affecting us in different ways, active, and so on.[19] (This is another reason why I-thou relations are so difficult to realize.) And he stresses that we should refrain from objectifying not only people and other objects, but—again typ-ically to spiritual-religious account—also God, the relation to whom, again, affects also us. The contemporary notion, which has arisen in a mostly secular context, is not applied to God. And being basically moral, it focuses on relations with human beings, and tends to leave relations with non-humans as beyond its scope; to some users of the contemporary notion it may also seem, at least at first sight, odd to apply the term to animals, plants or inanimate objects, since "objectification" is understood as the treatment of humans as if they were objects. Claiming that one has objectified a non-human would thus mean that one treated non-humans as if they were non-humans, or that one treated objects as if they were objects.[20]

Is the contemporary notion of objectification co-extensive with any morally wrong behavior? No. First, as already mentioned above, some cases of objectification, as shown by Nussbaum, are not morally wrong. Moreover, many types of immoral behavior are not objectification. For example, not keeping one's promise, acting cowardly, revealing secrets that were told to one in confidence, or lying need not be objectification; they are ways of treating human beings wrongly, but frequently are not ways in which we treat human beings in the fashion we usually reserve to objects.

For Buber, objectification is not co-extensive with any moral wrong. Some I-it behavior—for example, treating people in non-open way—may be perfectly decent from the moral point of view, but is still an I-it behavior, and as such should be avoided. Since he is not discussing only, or mainly, moral behavior, the scope of objectifying behaviors, for him, includes the moral behaviors, but is wider than the moral sphere. Although, for him, all immoral behavior is I-it behavior, not all I-it behavior is immoral behavior. But it is the case, for Buber, that I-it relations are co-extensive with any wrong behavior. As shown above, the wrong behavior need not be terribly and radically wrong, and is sometimes (although not always) unavoidable, and even understandable and legitimate. But it is still wrong in the sense that it is not what we should aim for and try to realize.

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We have up to now seen how comparing Buber's and the contemporary notions of objectification allows new insights into both. But the comparison is also suggestive of ways in which both accounts can adopt, with appropriate modifications, elements from one another, thus making both stronger and more interesting.

Let us examine, first, the features with which Buber typifies his notion. Could they be imported into the contemporary account? The accounts already share two features: instrumentality and lack of autonomy. The other features of Buber's account seem unhelpful and unsuitable for the contemporary one. Relating to others through the past rather than the present; relating to others through rules, laws, and set procedures and norms rather than spontaneously; and relating to others with only part (rather than the whole) of one's subjectivity seem, in the context of the contemporary account, to indicate merely coldness, formality and nonspontaneity in relations, but not what we would call today "objectification."

However, Buber's sixth feature, lack of reciprocity, is more interesting. It should be noted, first, that Buber does not call for full reciprocity. Indeed, once he accepts that there can be I-thou relations with animals, plants and inanimate objects, full reciprocity is excluded: he cannot, of course, take, say, a tree to treat one as one treats the tree. The partial reciprocity exists for him, rather, in the impact that one's actions toward others, including objects, has on oneself.[21] Moreover, for Buber reciprocity exists not only in I-thou relationship, but also in I-it ones: when one treats another as an "it," that too affects one and "closes" one just as one is closed to the "it." Thus, in a certain sense it is wrong to say that in Buber the I-thou, but not the I-it, is reciprocal. Both are reciprocal, but in the I-thou there is more of the relation in which the reciprocity can be expressed.

But can reciprocity, even with some adaptation, play a helpful role in the contemporary account? It seems that it cannot be easily incorporated into the modern notion, which may or may not be reciprocal. People may objectify others without at the same time becoming objectified. They may, for example, treat others as inert, unimportant, irrational, etc. without becoming themselves at the same time inert, unimportant or irrational. The victimizers will be behaving in a morally wrong way, but this need not make them objectified. But objectifying relations may also be reciprocal: consider the case of a "shouting match" between an immature and non-constructive couple, or between two drivers involved in a minor car accident, where each partner to the relation insults and objectifies the other.

The opposite of objectifying relations (perhaps we should call them "humanizing relations"), where people treat others as very rational, active, important, non-fungible, etc., may also be either reciprocal or nonreciprocal. Humanizing relations will be reciprocal when both (or all) parties to the interaction treat each other as non-fungible, inviolable, non-owned, rational, etc. But they do not have to be reciprocal: think about a case where person *A* treats person *B* as rational, important, active, and autonomous, while person *B* treats person *A* as non-rational, not important, i.e., in an objectifying way.

The reciprocity in Buber's notion of objectification, then, cannot be easily imported into the contemporary account, which, as mentioned above, tends to focus on the victim rather than on the victimizer, and is atomistic rather than relational.

Another Buberian element that is largely absent in the contemporary account is self-objectification. But here, it seems, borrowing and adapting Buber's notion of self-objectification into the contemporary account can enrich and develop it. It would help us see that just as one can deny others' worth, activity, uniqueness, rationality or subjectivity, so can one deny these characteristics in oneself, thus treating or relating to oneself in an objectifying way. One can objectify oneself also when one merely encourages, or even allows, others to treat oneself in that way. I am not at all sure that self-objectification is less common, and less harmful, than the objectification of others. There might be a worry, of course, that the notion would be used to "blame the victim" by putting part or all of the blame for cases of objectification on victims. But this need not happen. Allowing or encouraging others' objectification of oneself does not exonerate them from the charge. And

awareness of such cases may help diminish their extent. There are also cases, of course, where people objectify themselves without being objectified by others, where individuals treat themselves as inert, irrational, lacking in subjectivity, etc. Becoming aware of such attitudes and activities and checking them can be of great importance.

But note that the notion of self-objectification in the context of the contemporary discussion differs from the way Buber understands it. As he describes it, self-objectification is part of treating others in an objectifying way. He does not discuss cases where one so treats oneself in isolation from others, or allows others to so treat oneself. The notion as it was presented here, then, has to be changed and adapted when incorporated into the contemporary (and more atomistic) context.

Another interesting question relates to the objectification of non-humans. As we saw, Buber fully accepts this phenomenon. Could this feature of Buber's notion of objectification be profitably adopted into the modern one? Not all would welcome it, but by widening "objectification" to apply to some non-humans, this characteristic of Buber's objectification could be introduced, with adaptation, into the contemporary account. It is most likely that animals (or some animals), rather than plants and inanimate objects, would be included in the widened category of beings or entities that one could objectify. Animal rights supporters who believe that animals are sufficiently similar, in relevant respects, to humans, and who would distinguish both humans and animals (or some animals) from objects, can plausibly claim that certain acts wrongfully objectify animals. Given their suppositions, the claim makes ample sense. Of course, it would be incorrect to say in this context that the objectification consists in treating humans as though they were objects; one should say, rather, that objectification consists in treating both humans and animals as though they were objects. Such a notion of objectification would be somewhat different from the one presented in the present essay: denial of rationality would no longer be a relevant feature, and denial of subjectivity would be understood somewhat differently than it is now. Note, however, that in the contemporary account it is difficult to conceive how the notion of objectification could be widened to apply to all or almost all entities, as suggested in Buber.

Thus far we have seen some ways in which some of the characteristics of Buber's account could be used to develop and enrich the contemporary account. But could any of those of the contemporary account be also used to enrich and develop Buber's? Consider, first, the features of objectification. Could any of the contemporary notion be adopted into Buber's? Including in Buber's list the treatment of others as rational would be problematic, since in various instances it is likely to collide with his rejection of rules and procedures. However, other features of the contemporary notion will enrich Buber's account. This is true for relating to others as inert, fungible, violable, owned, and as lacking in subjectivity and in importance.

Because of the moral-legalistic nature of the contemporary account, it implies that, if one is objectified, one should alter one's position and stop the objectification as well as react by condemnation, dissociation, and perhaps retribution. This aspect of objectification, however, is largely absent from Buber's account. This is regrettable, since although Buber's account is basically religious-spiritual, it aims to be also all encompassing, and thus useful also in the moral sphere. Moreover, it is important to discuss one's appropriate reaction to being treated as an I-it even in the purely religious-spiritual sphere. Should one, in such cases, allow the relationship to continue? Should one, for example, continue one's effort to maintain I-thou relationship with those who treat one as an I-it? And if one should try to stop such interactions, in what ways should that be done? As shown above, the contemporary account does not sufficiently discuss how, when one objectifies, the objectification affects oneself. But Buber does not discuss sufficiently how, when one objectifies others, the objectification affects them, and how they should react to it. Adapting into Buber's discussion such themes, more developed in the contemporary understanding of objectification, may strengthen and enrich discussions inspired by his intuitions.

As already mentioned, the modern account distinguishes between entities that can be

objectified and entities that cannot (the former typically human). Buber, however, does not make such a distinction; he believes that we should apply, as much as possible, I-thou relations to all entities. But even if, as Buberians, we accept that I-thou relations should be applied to all entities, surely we should distinguish between the I-thou relations suitable to different entities. We have to eat some of them (even if only the plants, or some plants), and use some of them. Similarly, it is unreasonable not to allow differences between I-thou relations with a human friend and I-thou relations with a chair. Perhaps each of these categories, (which require further divisions to sub-categories) has its own version of I-thou vs. I-it, relations. Buber already does give place for it when he writes that we cannot have reciprocity with a tree as we have it with a human being. And his description of the I-thou relation to God suggests that there are differences in I-thou relationships to different types of entities. But here, too, his theory should be developed and enriched by adopting and adapting some distinctions that are clearer in the contemporary account.

It was pointed out above that Buber entertains a notion of self-objectification, and that this notion could be profitably adopted, after sufficient alterations, into the contemporary account. But I suggest that the Buberian notion of self-objectification, adopted with modifications into the contemporary account, may then be re-adopted, in its new form, back again into Buber's theory. Although Buber does not discuss cases where one objectifies oneself independently of objectifying others, they could—and should—be dealt with in his theory. This may sound too atomistic for a relational theory as Buber's, where whatever happens to people is presented as happening to them in relation to other entities. Nevertheless, cases where one relates, reflexively, mostly to oneself, constructively or destructively, suit very well the religious-spiritual orientation of Buber's discussion, and his account could give a place to self-objectification of the sort discussed here. Could not the thou of the I-thou, or the it of the I-it, sometimes be the I itself? This may be yet another example of the way in which the comparison between Buber's and the contemporary account of objectification can enrich the discussion of both.

ENDNOTES

1. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970), 55, 59.
2. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Objectification," in *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 213–39. Nussbaum's essay is the first to discuss the notion in analytical terms, and as far as I know, it has not been superseded to date by any other discussion.
3. Ibid., 218.
4. Ibid.
5. *I and Thou*, 62–63, 88, 91.
6. Ibid., 90, 100.
7. Ibid., 81.
8. Ibid., 63–64. Buber may have received the idea of associating the treatment of objects to the past from Marx and Engels. Marx and Engels claim that in the bourgeois, objectifying society living labor, which they relate to the present, is merely a means to increase accumulated labor, which they relate to the past. In the non-objectifying, communist society, on the other hand, accumulated labor is a means to promote the worker's well-being. Hence "in Bourgeois society . . . the past dominates the present; in Communist society, the present dominates the past." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 257. Although Buber's explanation for the association of objectification with the past seems to differ from Marx and Engel's explanation, Buber does not quite clarify it. Perhaps it has to do with the similarity between the "rigidity" of objects (see 64) and the "rigidity" of the past, which cannot be changed. Perhaps he also relates the past to efficient causation and, thus, to determinism and lack of freedom.
9. *I and Thou*, 59, 61, 62, 80–81.
10. Ibid., 54, 60, 62.
11. This is less true and, in some cases, not true at all with regard to those very close to us.

12. *I and Thou*, 68–69, 84–85.

13. Ibid., 96–103.

14. Nussbaum, "Objectification," 227–32; Cass Sunstein, Review of Nadine Strossen's *Defending Pornography, Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights* (New York: Scribner, 1995), *The New Republic* (January 5, 1995), cited in Nussbaum, "Objectification," 214.

15. Nusbaum, "Objectification," 215, 228–31.

16. *I and Thou*, 117–19.

17. Ibid., 54, 55.

18. Ibid., 53–54.

19. Ibid., 123-26, 57–59.

20. Nussbaum, "Objectification," 218.

21. *I and Thou*, 172–73.

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