

FINDING LOVE IN THE KINGDOM OF ENDS

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Commentary on Rae Langton's *Sexual Solipsism* for *Jurisprudence*.

Reading the final essays of Rae Langton's *Sexual Solipsism* is almost too much to bear, at times, for anyone still hopeful about the prospects for finding love that is mutual and respectful. Langton is a lovely writer. Her style engages like few other contemporary philosophers, if only because her prose achieves that rare balance of being undoubtedly analytic at the same time as being both searching and subtle. Reading *Sexual Solipsism* is like reading the best of philosophy as told by a gentle, careful novelist. However she does it, it has a fantastic effect on the reader.

In *Sexual Solipsism*, Langton instructs us to look at the web of relationships between pornography, objectification, sex, love, and solipsism. It's a messy web. Pornography offers various paths to objectification, to sex (in a sense), and to solipsism—although perhaps not to love. Love, in turn, can invite objectification, and, again—and too often—solipsism.

The master idea that she weaves throughout the book is that we encounter something not unlike the epistemic solipsism entertained by Descartes when we treat persons in certain sorts of objectifying, reductive ways. It is not surprising for her to suggest that when we reduce other people to body parts through the consumption of pornography we are alone, and they are left alone too. We have not engaged with another as a person. We have not treated another with respect. We have, in our confrontations with their sexuality, used them for our purposes—as things, as tools, as objects. But, there are other paths to solipsism as well. Most notably we can encounter a kind of solipsism in a loving relationship when someone has somehow become estranged from another as a person.

This web of relationships is cultivated further by Langton's discussion of Kant's views of love and, more particularly, sexual love. Kant, it seems, may share the feminist view that some (most? all?) sexual activity is inherently objectifying. The prospects are truly grim; at one point Langton gives the enamoured Kantian two choices: 'Kant may hold [two] views about the intentional content of sexual desire, and they apply to different kinds of sexual love: it can be a desire for a person *qua* body, a *reductive* desire; and it can be a desire for a person *qua* person, but what I shall call an *invasive* desire'.¹ Claiming that Kant may have been unconvinced that sexual love is an appropriate means of evincing one's respect for other persons is, perhaps, an understatement. Does Langton agree with Kant on this score? It's not altogether clear—I suspect she does. Before considering this question in more detail, let's look more carefully at how we get there.

Langton's discussions of solipsism are not confined to the moral consequences of engagement with pornography. She also considers solipsism more generally, including that which can arise in the pursuit of love. I may fantasize about another, and in so doing impose myself on the beloved in a way that consumes the identity of the other entirely. Langton describes several examples of this. There is a character in an Ian McEwan novel, who, having fallen into a loving relationship with a German woman after the war, fantasizes that he is in fact raping her and that she is his prisoner of war to be unwillingly used. This fantasy remains just that, while the real man and his

¹ R Langton, *Sexual Solipsism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009), p 369.

German partner continue to engage in a loving relationship. In the second example that Langton treats at length, Proust describes his unreachable beloved. The terms he uses to describe her start out as any person might in reflecting upon someone he does not yet know but wants to know. He characterizes her affectionately, but at a distance. This distance is, of course, inevitable. Before I know a person, I see her from afar. Before I come closer, I fantasize about her qualities and concerns; she becomes a detailed object of my imagination long before her true character becomes known. This is the inevitable progression of wanting to know someone and then coming to actually know that person. But sometimes things take another route, as they do with poor lonely Proust. Sometimes our beloved remains at a distance and we continue to invent her qualities, project our own desires upon her, and use her for our own purposes—whether this is self-exploration or, worse, self-aggrandizement. It is in such cases that we use the beloved as a tool, as a means to an end that does not involve loving her as a human being, as a person whose real character puts limits on our fantasies. It is here again, in this kind of use, that in the pursuit of love we encounter solipsism instead.

The solipsisms of sex and love described by Langton are layered and rich. Worryingly so. As I read Langton's essays I find myself encouraged at first. Her tender portrayal of Maria von Herbert's desolation (and Kant's stern response) convincingly presents Kant's conception of friendship as central to a moral life. Without the love found in friendship, and perhaps even romance, we cannot engage in the foundational moral relationship. As Langton describes it, a friendship allows for participation in activities that make possible mutual respect and the pursuit of autonomously chosen ends, all done with the goal of reciprocal love as opposed to an apathetic commitment to duty. It is von Herbert's very isolation that makes her morally desolate: the moral life and the call of duty are empty for her without a loving relationship. Her loss of love makes irrelevant her obligation to overcome her inclinations for the sake of duty. When Kant endorses 'moral apathy' as distinct from moral indifference, he is praising the ability to overcome the temptations of sensuality and inclinations out of respect for the moral law. He is quite explicitly not praising obedience to the moral law that arises from the indifference that has plagued someone like the love-lost von Herbert.²

Langton argues that Kant seems to be making an even stronger point about love and friendship. It's not just that the loveless person may find herself indifferent to sensual inclinations and so obey the moral law for its own sake, but that the loveless person may be trapped inside herself. He describes the person without a friend as someone who is in the 'prison of the self'. This prison is, as Kant sees it, hellish. Entering into a friendship means surrendering one's self in a way that is not autonomy-denying; on the contrary, this is a form of self-surrender that transports a person into a purely moral relationship with another. I give up my ends in order to serve the ends of my friend out of love; and he does the same for me. In the surrender and reciprocity that defines our relationship we 'escape' or 'unlock' the prison of the self and in doing so escape the moral solipsism that traps the loveless—such as von Herbert.

So, simplifying a bit, despite Kant's talk of apathetic commitment to duty, it is the loving friendship that is at the heart of our moral life. If this is all Kant has to say about friendship and love, I'll take it. Unfortunately, things start to get murky for Kant's cupid. As we move closer toward our beloved, the relationship moves from a respectful friendship to romantic, perhaps sexual, love. As one becomes more intimate

² *Ibid*, p 213.

with one's beloved, does this deepen the central moral relationship of friendship? Not necessarily. What might look like progression of a loving relationship toward greater levels of sexual intimacy may actually move the couple away from a respect for one another's autonomy grounded in surrender and reciprocity. The moral growth that accompanies deepening intimacy faces, at a certain point, a precipice. It is when this intimacy moves toward what we might optimistically call sexual love. At this point, as Kant and Langton both note, our moral lives are suddenly complicated. Danger lurks.

The danger is that sexual love brings with it the possibility of various 'pathologies'³ of intimacy. Langton entertains the possibility that Kant thinks that friendship and sexual love could be alike in offering this escape from the prison of the self; the reciprocal self-surrender in sexual intimacy might also provide freedom from solipsism.⁴ She demurs that this is an unwarranted optimism, and that Kant's pessimistic claims about sexual love are probably a more accurate reflection of his views on the matter.⁵ Here is Langton on Kant's most direct claims about sexual love: 'Kant suggests that sexual desire carries, in itself, a tendency to this kind of solipsism. He says that when a human being becomes an object of someone's sexual desire, the "person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such." He says, notoriously, that "sexual love makes of the loved person an object of appetite; as soon as the appetite has been stilled, the person is cast aside as one casts away a lemon that has been sucked dry."⁶ This is pretty unambiguous. Sexual desire makes things out of persons, makes them objects of appetite, and leaves them cast away as spent objects once sexual desire has been satisfied. Read this way, there's little room to doubt that Kant thought that sexual love is incompatible with the moral respect owed to persons.

One of Langton's principal goals in these essays is to pursue the similarities between Kant's views of objectification, particularly with respect to sexual love, and feminist views on the same. Whereas Kant is an unlikely feminist ally, Langton points the reader to a number of points of contact. Feminists have described sexual objectification as having a 'social meaning' imposed on a person in a way that 'defines you as to be sexually used';⁷ and they have pointed to pornography as an explicit means to deny women's autonomy through objectification. One of the tensions facing feminist analyses has been whether the objectifying nature of pornography is inherently autonomy-denying. For example, are there examples of pornography in which women's autonomy is somehow affirmed, or cases where the consumers of pornography can ever 'survive with our moral characters intact'?⁸ The strongest answer to these questions is 'no'—not if pornography, like all forms of sexual 'love', is inherently incompatible with the moral respect owed to persons. But the question I would like to press Langton on is whether this holds true for all sexual love. Langton's strength in these final essays is in

³ I use this term hesitatingly. In the end, I'm not altogether sure what is normal, what is inevitable, and what is a pathology of sexual love on Langton's account. This will become clearer by the end of this essay.

⁴ *Ibid*, p 321.

⁵ *Ibid*, p 325.

⁶ *Ibid*, p 316.

⁷ *Ibid*, p 223, quoting C MacKinnon, *Feminist Theory of the State*, (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1989), p 122.

⁸ Langton, p 224, fn 5. Here she is quoting Joel Feinberg's account of his reaction to erotic comic strips.

her dismantling of the concepts of autonomy and objectification. (And, in doing so, she develops an account of objectification and the relationship between it and autonomy that is far more sophisticated than Kant's.) Before pressing this further, let's back up and look at what objectification amounts to and when, if ever, it is compatible with a loving relationship.

It is important to note that there are clear dissimilarities between Kant's analysis and Langton's analysis of objectification. One of the ways in which Kant characterizes objectification is as being treated as a natural phenomenon, as part of the realm of sensory appearances.⁹ It is not difficult to see how, for Kant, sexual intimacy involves treating a person as within the realm of sensory appearances—even entirely within this realm for a period. Perhaps Kant also thinks that being in the natural world in this way is itself, for a person, morally objectionable. Langton, however, hesitates. She recognizes a plurality of objectifications, and, in doing so, offers a complicated and qualified defence of objectification itself. Is this the most surprising outcome of this book? These are, after all, essays on pornography and objectification in which Langton largely argues that pornography is morally offensive because it objectifies, and because it fails to treat women as autonomous. And, she does this largely along Kantian lines. One of the results of her account is a moral endorsement of forms of objectification in each of these aspects of our lives. These are kinds of objectification that can make someone an object of knowledge, or concern, or fear, or even love. And why not? Why not think that there are forms of objectification, even in the context of sexual love, that fall under a form of defensible objectification?¹⁰

Kant would claim that engaging in a respectful, but intimate, relationship requires, minimally, that one treat his lover as an end-in-herself, that he respects her rational nature, that he regards her as autonomous, that he not objectify her, and that he not treat her as a mere tool. Presumably the problems with objectification in the context of sexual love have to do with both a complicated kind of autonomy-denial and the resulting solipsism. But any challenge to objectification *simpliciter* is, as I think Langton claims, defeasible. The most important point, for Kant, might be the final one on this list. Problematically, sexual love seems to involve, necessarily perhaps, that another person be treated as a tool. Of course, the problem is not in treating a person as a tool; it comes in treating a person as a *mere* tool. 'Mere'-ness will typically be established counterfactually. For example, if a server is bringing me coffee, then she is being treated as a tool. This itself is not immoral. It is only immoral if she were being treated as a *mere* tool. Most of the time this distinction will never become apparent. But, counterfactually, imagine that the server were to go into cardiac arrest. If, at this point, I were to disregard her as a defective tool, then it's clear that I would fail to treat her as an end-in-herself. This seems like a reasonable test. Langton, like Kant, recognizes that there are ways in which we treat one another like tools regularly, just as we objectify others at times, without compromising ourselves morally.

Could there be a parallel analysis in the treatment of sexual love? Can one's lover be regarded as 'nothing more than an appearance' as long as, counterfactually (or perhaps at other times), she is granted the respect of an autonomous, rational agent? Presumably, when something is treated as an object, this involves treating it as lacking

⁹ *Ibid*, p 329.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 204.

responsibility and as nothing more than a bundle of appearances.¹¹ And, presumably, if I were to treat a person in this way it would be a violation of that person's 'inalienable dignity'. But it might be the case that Langton is suggesting that inalienability is scalar. It might be the case that a person has not taken away his lover's dignity if he brings her appearance to the fore, downplaying (but not alienating) her rational autonomous nature. This is admittedly a very risky road to go down. After all, the problems with objectification are not that a person is *always* objectified. But it also might not be the case that the problem with objectification is that a person is *ever* objectified. It seems like a counterfactual treatment of objectification and respect might be helpful here just as it was helpful in the example above.

For example, if I temporarily treat a person as a thing, does my moral relationship with that person cease? Presumptively, were I permanently to treat someone as an object of knowledge then I would be doing something immoral—that is, treating a person as *something* to be studied and discovered, but not as a subjective participant in my pursuit, not as *someone* who is autonomous, an end, and deserving of respect. However, if I were to treat a person as an object of knowledge for the purposes of research or discovery while maintaining an attitude of counterfactual deference to his autonomy, it's less clear that this would be disrespectful. For example, if I were to desire to study the 44th President of the United States, I might make Barack Obama the object of my research. In doing so, I might project the concerns of my project upon him, or meld the details of his life to my narrative. This remains morally neutral. If, however, it were to come to light that my research was invading his privacy, that he wanted me to stop my pursuit of using his life as an object of my intellectual desire, and I were to refuse to do so because I did not regard him as an autonomous agent worthy of subjective participation in this project, then my project would no longer be morally neutral. This is so even if it never comes to light that Obama protests my objectifying him. That is, it's important what I would do counterfactually. This is one of the ways to distinguish between being treated as a tool and being treated as a *mere* tool. Similarly, it might be a way in which I can determine the moral status of objectification.

Could the same test be applied to sexual love between men and women? There's the rub. I think the answer to this might be 'no', according to Langton. The wrinkle in this account comes from arguments made by MacKinnon. As Langton expresses it: 'Men attribute certain qualities to women, see women a certain way, and that projection of qualities "is not just an illusion or fantasy or a mistake. It becomes embodied because it is enforced."' ¹² Langton echoes this several times. She says that women *really* have the qualities; they just don't have them *by nature*. Given this treatment of realism and sexual objectification, consider again the difference between being treated as a tool and being treated as a *mere* tool. If a man were to objectify a woman, and yet resist Kant's claim that any act of objectification constituted a complete cessation of his moral relationship with this woman, he would still need to defend himself from the charge that in treating her in this way he is treating her as a *mere* tool. If he were to implement the counterfactual test, he would consider how he would treat her if his objectification were to somehow conflict with her autonomy, the respect that she deserves and her status as an end-in-herself. The Langton-MacKinnon analysis complicates this because it

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 331.

¹² *Ibid*, p 333, quoting C MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1987), p 119.

suggests that the objectification of women by men *makes it the case* that women are in fact submissive. It is not just that he is treating her as an object of his desire, but it is the case that, given certain external power relationships, this remains the case even in the counterfactual scenario, and despite his intentions to the contrary.

As a contrast, consider other examples of tools. I use a hammer as a tool for carpentry. It would make no sense for me to use it as anything but a tool. If I were to suppose, counterfactually, that I not treat my hammer as a mere tool, and that I ought to consider its subjective participation in my carpentry, then I would be doing something absurd. The absurdity lies with my hammer's lack of actual autonomy. And if it's the case that a person similarly lacks autonomy, counterfactually treating her as autonomous in order to demonstrate that one is not treating her as a mere tool would similarly be absurd. Langton makes, at various points throughout the book, strongly metaphysical claims about the power of pornography and objectification. The claim is not that pornography *treats women as* silent, but rather that pornography *silences*. There is a similar claim that, in sexual love, women are not just *treated as* objects, but rather that women *become* objects. Because objectification is enforced, women become these things, these tools. This strong metaphysical claim by Langton is complex in a way that is largely convincing but nonetheless deeply frustrating. It might be the case that there are acts that, despite everything, alienate people from their dignity and the respect that they deserve. Which acts of sex and love are like this? The lingering worry is how to understand the possibilities for sexual love given this broader discussion of objectification and solipsism.

The possibilities for finding love in the kingdom of ends seem to rely, on one hand, on treating some kinds of sexual objectification as morally acceptable, defensible even. On the other hand, one might find this love by denying that sexual intimacy between people must take the form of objectification at all. That is, it might be to embrace the reading of Kant whereby friendship is characterized by surrender and reciprocation, but reject that deepening intimacy involves the surrender of the self to the merely natural world with no reciprocal return of oneself in love. I prefer this second option. While I came to this conclusion by way of a thoroughly enjoyable study of Langton's incisive analysis of objectification and sexual solipsism, I am not sure that she thinks love in the kingdom of ends would look quite like this.