

Coram Bryant  
March 19, 2010

## The problem of Objectification

Objectification, in its most general sense, is the treatment of an entity as an object. Although, seemingly innocuous, the process of objectification threatens, in an abstract sense, a full understanding of the entity, and in a literal sense, the integrity of the entity itself.

The ability to differentiate the world into objects of upon which to act and think appears to be an important, if not necessary, developmental survival tactic [Note: I have some references to Russell, Piaget, and likely others to unpack here]. However, a bias toward treating as object that which is perceived as distinct from the self can limit a comprehensive understanding of the entity. Furthermore, this process may have serious repercussions, as described by Martha Nussbaum in her analysis of sexual objectification (2006). To Nussbaum, objectification is an active process of reclassifying an entity to accommodate a subjective purpose, one which entails one or more of set of non-exhaustive factors. These include *instrumentality* (treatment of an entity as a personal means to an end), *denial of autonomy*, *inertness* (treatment of an entity as lacking in agency), *fungibility* (treatment of the entity interchangeable with other objects), *violability* (treatment of the entity as lacking in integrity, as a candidate for division), *ownership*, and *denial of subjectivity* (treatment of the entity as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account).

Although Nussbaum applies these characteristics to the objectification of persons, and even makes the claim that inanimate objects are acceptable targets of objectification, her factors in the absence of moralization seem applicable to a general definition. Furthermore, it is not clear that drawing a line between entities that are candidates for objectification and those that are not is constructive. In fact, thinkers such as Martin Buber, have suggested that dehumanization results from an objectivist relationship with reality as a whole (Buber, 1970). In his classic book, *I and Thou*, Buber suggests that individuals engage with people, objects, and the world in one of two modes: *Ich-Es* ("I-It") and *Ich-Du* ("I-Thou"). The former describes a relationship in which the self engages with mentally-represented, objectified conceptualization of the being, a view consistent with phenomenological theory. In this mode, The individual engages in a monologue with the self, typically in the interest of the self. In contrast, the *Ich-Du* mode is characterized by relationships in which two entities encounter one another in the absence of objectification. This is an idealized encounter in which meaning and understanding are exchanged in the absence of particular structure or content. Buber suggests that life consists of movement between states of *Ich-Es* and *Ich-Du*, although the latter is rare, and increasingly so in modern, analytic, material world. The result of this historic increase in *Ich-Es* interactions is isolation and dehumanization. Buber's philosophy suggests that objectification, in any form, leads to personal isolation and dehumanization of others, suggesting the need for collective engagement with the world in the mode of *Ich-Du*, or de-objectification. This is to be distinguished from the so-called *pathetic fallacy*, a special case of the *fallacy of reification*, which criticizes the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities. The position presented here is one of engaging the world, and the entities therein, in relationships in which meaning is exchanged and integrity is revered, as opposed to viewing the world as objects on which to act.

Objectification as a social problem is both reflected and reinforced in formal education. This practice is colorfully illustrated by critical theorist Paulo Freire in his description of information banking: "[The teacher's] task is to 'fill' the students with the contents of his narration -- contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity" (Freire, 1970, p.

57). Here is described the objectification of content as mechanism for dispensing information. "Implicit in [this] banking concept is the assumption of the dichotomy between man and the world: man is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; man is spectator, not re-creator" (Freire, 1970, p. 62). In Freire's description, an objective view of reality yields pedagogy that dispenses objectified content, from teachers as objects, to students as objects. The result of the objective view, therefore, is collective dehumanization, which is of concern to even the most anthropocentric philosopher. Achieving the inverse of this process constitutes a significant learning problem. To wit, how might we support learning as a process of de-objectified exchange between content, students, and teachers?

## **The Role of Empathy**

A critical element to de-objectification is empathy, and its active component, critical perspective-taking (the cognitive counterpart to intuitive, emotional affectation). Empathy has been shown to be a critical element of interpersonal life, having been linked to being socially skilled (McMahon, Wernsman, & Parnes, 2006), establishing friendships (Crick & Dodge, 1994), and even social skill development and academic gains in classrooms (Gehlbach, n.d.; Wentzel, 1991, 1993). As such, the fostering of empathy presents itself as a potential contributing factor to de-objectification in education. That being said, an understanding of the multiple substrates of empathy is critical to leveraging it as a solution.

### *Neurophysiological/Behavioral*

As demonstrated by Preston and De Waal in *Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases* (2002), the nature and mechanisms of empathy are subject to much deliberation across the emotional and cognitive domains. By presenting a model that encompasses both the proximal and ultimate mechanisms of empathy, they provide a powerful spectrum within which to evaluate various forms and degrees of empathy in myriad settings. The proximal element in their model is founded in the concept that the perception of an external actor activates the viewer's corresponding representation, which triggers autonomic and somatic responses. This model is bolstered by recent neuroscientific discoveries related to so-called "mirror neurons," which reside in the premotor and inferior parietal cortices in humans. These neurons have been shown to fire analogously when a subject performs an action, but also when the subject views the action performed by another, suggesting a biological underpinning to empathy. This supposition is strengthened by fMRI studies demonstrating neurophysiological differences in behavior in populations known to struggle with empathy, particularly those classified as autistic. Furthermore, their Perception-Action Model of empathy provides a continuum between these neural underpinnings, intermediate autonomic and somatic responses, and the ultimate manifestations of empathy in the forms of inclusive fitness, reciprocal altruism, and various strategies employed across individuals across all stages of development and social situations. This model provides a powerful framework to inform the design of a technology that facilitates deep, structural empathetic learning. [react: per Jesse :)]

### *Social/Cultural*

The evidence provided in support of the Perception-Action Model, which suggests near-universal ontogenic substrates for empathy, informs the close relationship between culture and empathy. Hoffman, in *Empathy and Moral Development* (2000), suggests two higher-order cognitive modes of empathy in addition to three non-verbal modes. These are "mediated association" - the association of expressive cues in another individual with personal past experience, and "role-or perspective-taking," in which one imagines how another feels in a particular situation. The critical implication of these cognitive modes is that empathy typically involves a close match between the affect of the observer and that of the observed, and that this occurs most frequently between those with greater cultural overlap. More importantly, empathy is severely challenged by situations in which culture is not shared. This formal treatment of empathy provides a

theoretical justification for addressing empathy as a cross-cultural learning problem. [react: per Jesse :)]

### *Applications in Education*

The neurophysiological and cultural underpinnings of empathy suggest that it is an interactive process that results from gradual development over the course of life. However, this development is limited by the availability of opportunities to engage in interactions with diverse individuals (i.e. individuals of different cultural expressions). This underscores the critical role of education in providing support for empathic development. Keen, in *Empathy in the Novel* (2007), presents a compelling argument for the power of narrative to provide opportunities for developing empathy. She posits that fiction comes alive via participatory user input, in the form of *active cocreation*, and that it is in fiction that readers are afforded opportunities to "try on" mental states of (potentially culturally distinct) characters. This is consistent with Bruner's description of narrative and other symbol-based cultural products as mediators of reality (Bruner, 1991). Central to this process are "Intentional State Entailment", the concept that narrative characters have "beliefs, desires, theories, values, and so on" (Bruner, 1991, p. 7), and Referentiality, the principle that the story indirectly, and with verisimilitude, references reality (Bruner, 1991). This potential for narrative to foster empathy and perspective taking may be applied to other elements of education, particularly non-fictional history, although postmodern historians such as Keith Jenkins have suggested that the past constitutes a foreign domain that is not accessible via empathy (Jenkins, 1991). [react: per Jesse :)]

### **The Role of Dialogue**

The inherent challenge in relationships, particularly in the asymmetrical variety, is that understanding of the other and their state of being tends to fall into the realm of theory rather than experiential knowledge. Specifically, relationships are governed by what has been termed Theory of Mind, the ability to comprehend the existence of distinct mental states in and beyond oneself. In the absence of a true experience of the other, however, this projection consistently leads to objectification. Freire depicts this consequence in his description of the education as banking, in which the teacher-as-subject conceives of students as objectified depositories of knowledge. Naturally, a prescribed student behavior, one of passive receptivity, is promoted (Freire, 1970). To combat this objectification, Freire suggests a form of co-intentional, dialogic engagement between students and teachers. It is this praxis, a cycle of reflection and action, that reveals the common condition of students and teachers in an oppressive system, while simultaneously offering the potential for escape.

The entry-point to education founded in dialogue is what is described by Freire as "problem-posing" education, which rejects objectification and necessitates communication. The essential problem being addressed is that of deconstructing objectified dialogic actors, specifically the students and the teachers (Freire, 1970).

When this occurs, and individuals engage in egalitarian dialogue, where truth prevails over authoritarianism, engagement of people and concepts, in Buber's de-objectified I-Thou level, may occur. In problem-posing education, people "come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" and affirms people as "in the process of becoming -- as unfinished, uncomplete beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (Freire, 1970, pp. 71-72). This is the objective of de-objectification.

Further insight into the nature of dialogue is provided by psychologist Hubert Hermans, creator of Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 1992). DST suggests that interpersonal dialogue is an extension of the intrapersonal interaction of internal and external components of self. In this model, based on the work of William James, self extends beyond the physical contour of the individual, encompassing all that is viewed possessively, including family, friends, and even enemies! The dialogic component is informed by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who suggests that dialogue does not reside

purely in language or in logic, but also in the context of the exchange. The interpersonal extension of Dialogical Self Theory, the interaction of projections of self within a situated dialogue, is the basis for the critical elements of perspective-taking and empathy that underscore collaborative growth. This has been demonstrated in the Learning By Teaching Method, described by Gartner et al. (1970), in which students must reflect continuously on the mental processes of the other students in the classroom, which is a basis for empathy.

### **Target learners**

Given this described objective of de-objectification, the target learning audience must be considered. Russell suggests that adolescence marks a period of "further division between expressive and reflective aspects" (1984, p. 69), which allows individuals of that age to discover the they possess charactersitics that may be judged by their inner selves as well as by others. It should be noted that Russell distinguishes bewteen his description and those in the "Piagetian tradition" who describe the "tendency which some adolescents show of making a division between a 'true' inner self and a 'false' outer self" (1984, p. 69). Nonetheless, either side of the argument suggests that adolescence constitutes an appropriate, early age for exploring the distinctions between object and subject via dialogue.

### **Toward A Solution: an Artistic Metaphor**

The term *empathy* has its origins in the German *emfühling*, which literal means "feeling into" as opposed to the sympathetic "feeling with." Theodor Lipps coined this term in 1885 to describe aesthetics, the science of perception, and to sculpture in particular. He elaborated a psychological doctrine based on the premise that "every aesthetic object represents a living being" and that "in contemplating a work of art, a person projects himself into that object and experiences a specific state of mind" (Szalita, 1981). Although this succumbs directly to the Pathetic Fallacy mentioned above, it serves as a powerful metaphor for understanding the process of engaging individuals in empathic dialogue. In this spirit, the following artistic metaphor exemplifies the movement from an objective mode of education to a polysubjective orientation.

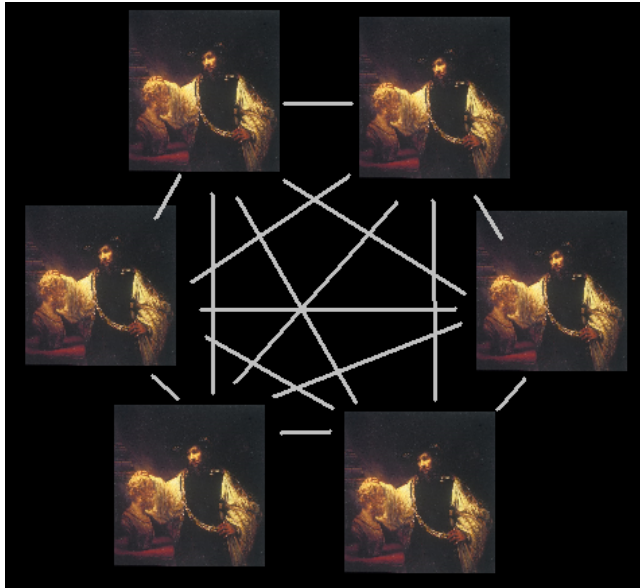


*The Art Critic* of Norman Rockwell (1955) exemplifies the approach of objective categorization. In the painting, a young art student meticulously analyzes the surface of a museum painting, impervious to the fact that the picture is actively gazing back at him, or that a group of men in an adjacent work are enthralled by the proceedings. Although an appreciation for this work requires an active imagination, one overt implication is that the obsession with superficial, object qualities distracts the viewer from comprehending the internal reality of the entity under the microscope.

This treatment finds a contrast in Rembrandt van Rijn's *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* (1653), in which the live Aristotle is depicted in serious contemplation of the statue of Homer before him. A sense that the philosopher is engaged in unlocking the poetic secrets contained within the marble corpus is palpable.



The de-objectification between the individual and the object of his/her attention represents a requisite first step in achieving the dialogic ideal described by Freire and Buber. Specifically, the relationship between Aristotle and Homer as depicted by Rembrandt illustrates the ideal of Reflection, a tertiary component of praxis as presented by Freire. Subsequent action and dialogue, in which subjective reflections are contrasted in a meaningful exchange would yield a socially constructed empathy, a collective "feeling in" to the content as provided. Diagrammatically, this could be viewed as as the intersection of all combinations of subjective reflection. Through this process, students would experience broader understanding of their original perceptions as they are exposed to novel perspectives.



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