

How to Do Things with Philosophy  
On Nancy Bauer's *How to Do Things with Pornography*  
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1.

As I began to read Nancy Bauer's book, my first thought was: *is this philosophy?* But that I didn't mean: how does this thing deserve the honorific 'philosophy'? Instead I meant: could philosophy, a thing I love but whose instantiations so often fill me with boredom and despair, be like *this* thing, these essays crafted with ethical sensitivity, and wit, and attention to the things that philosophy by its nature (we often think) must obscure – the particular, the contingent, the actuality of the world as it is, to us, here and now? How could a philosopher speak with such ease about sexual fetishes and hookup culture and the artistry of Lady Gaga or Ryan Gosling? And not just with ease, but without any sense of the worldly alienation that philosophers, perhaps in an attempt to police the boundaries of their own intellectual purity, often evince when they attempt to talk about the world as it is for ordinary people.

I had a similar experience during my first encounter with Bauer's work, when I read her piece "Pornutopia" in one of the early issues of the Brooklyn-based literary magazine *n+1*. That piece is reprinted as the first chapter of Bauer's new book. It is a provocative call for us to grapple with the phenomenology of pornography, what it is and what it gives to the people it turns on. It is keenly argued and keenly felt, with none of the worldly alienation that, as I have already said, is so often associated with philosophical writing. The piece came out originally in *n+1* in the winter of 2007, when I was a senior in college. I had just decided to go to Oxford to do graduate work in philosophy. Meanwhile some of my fellow students were moving to New York to become writers and critics; many would end up working at and writing for *n+1*. Watching them across the ocean from England for the next several years, I often felt envy. Here I was writing tutorial essays on the metaphysics of causation or brains-in-vats, and there they were writing about American hegemony, the cultural geist, and what it might mean to be political for my generation. No one but my supervisor cared what I thought, but they were claiming a voice for themselves within culture, and people were listening.

I consoled myself with the thought that if I was ever going to have anything worth saying to the wider world outside analytic philosophy, then I needed to learn how to think more carefully and rigorously, for which philosophical training was uniquely useful. And I still believe this to be true. But at times I feared that being a

philosopher and being a public thinker were simply two different things, involving two different and incompatible orientations toward the world, and that for better or worse I had made my bed in philosophy and now had to lie in it. But Bauer's early *n+1* piece, and indeed all her work, shows that this dichotomy I so feared was a false one. Or rather that it's a dichotomy that, while perhaps all too real given the way philosophy is currently practiced, need *not* be real, with a proper reorientation of philosophy toward the world.

Bauer's book is about many things – most obviously, about feminist debates about pornography and about what Austin was really up to in *How to Do Things with Words*, and how the former misconstrues the latter. But most of all, on my reading at least, Bauer's book is about how we might do philosophy, and what philosophy might be. In particular, it offers a vision of how to talk, as increasingly many philosophers want to do, about things that matter in our ordinary lives: gender, subordination, identity, sexuality, desire. Bauer's suggestion is that it's not enough to take our familiar philosophical tools and turn them toward new topics, as if we are on some intellectual assembly line, endlessly performing the same task on different things. We need instead to re-examine our tools, to ask ourselves what we are doing with them, and why. We as philosophers need to re-learn how to do things with our words.

## 2.

Bauer's book is a set of interlocking and overlapping essays, which weave back and forth between many themes and topics. A succinct overview is therefore impossible. But I want to suggest one thread to pick up and follow, one way of making one's way through the complex architecture of the book's thought. I will begin with Bauer's treatment of pornography and work my way back to Bauer's views on philosophy, hoping to show why and how the two are intimately connected.

Several feminist philosophers, most notably Rae Langton and Jennifer Hornsby, have sought to mount a philosophical defence of Catharine MacKinnon's famous claim that pornography doesn't merely have the effect of subordinating and silencing women, but in *itself* subordinates and silences women. That philosophical defence makes use of Austin's famous distinction between the semantic, illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of our speech. According to the standard reading of Austin, our locutions can be understood not only in terms of their literal meaning – their *locutionary* dimension – but also in terms of what sort of *illocutions* or *speech acts* they are: whether they are, for example, promises, requests, commands, prohibitions, invitations, predictions, warnings and so on. Thus we can ask not only what certain

locutions mean, but also what they *do*. Langton and others argue that pornography is a kind of speech that does something in particular: namely, it ranks women as subordinate to men, legitimates violence against women, and silences women by making it impossible for them to successfully perform the speech act of saying no to sex. Thus pornography does not merely have the contingent, *perlocutionary* tendency to increase the subordination or silencing of women. It is in itself an illocutionary act of subordination and silencing, and is thus essentially – and not just contingently – harmful to women.

This project, Bauer argues, comes up against two problems, each having to do with authority. First, as Langton acknowledges, for pornography to successfully achieve the speech act of ranking or legitimation or silencing, it must have the requisite authority with which to do so. I can't, even if I so desire, make marijuana legal, or perform a marriage, or declare a pitch a ball at a baseball game. That's because I lack the requisite authority: the acts of legalising, marrying and making baseball calls require me to have a certain socially recognised standing – as a legislator, an officiant, an umpire. Bauer's worry is that pornography doesn't have the requisite authority to do the things that Langton and Hornsby claim it does. Obviously, pornography or pornographers don't have any legally recognised, institutionalised standing to issue claims about the inferiority of women or legitimate their subordination. Pornography or pornographers aren't like legislators, officiants or umpires. Langton and Hornsby instead argue that the authority that pornography has is a more informal matter: boys and men, and perhaps women too, take pornography to be authoritative, treating it as authoritative, and in so doing endow it with authority. Pornography tells us what women are like – that is, permanently aroused objects whose *no's* always means *yes* – and we believe it.

Bauer is unconvinced by this account of pornography's authority. She asks us to imagine a case in which a boy consumes pornography that presents men forcing sex on women. The boy later forces sex on his own girlfriend. Suppose he is questioned, and he claims that he felt authorised by pornography to treat his girlfriend in this way. Bauer claims that we would rightly think the boy is being “grossly disingenuous” (78). This is because, she says:

There is nothing in the case to *be* authorized: the idea that women are essentially sexual objects for men, along with the idea that the happiest and most womanly women embrace this status, is ubiquitously accepted in our culture (ibid).

In other words, there is no significant sense in which it is pornography, as opposed to any other aspect of our widespread culture of sexual subordination, that authorises the boy's assault of his girlfriend. Indeed, the pervasiveness and normalisation of sexual subordination leaves nothing for pornography to authorise. The question of pornography's putative 'authority' thus gives out in to a critique of culture more generally. If we are going to understand pornography, we need to come to terms with our general cultural understanding of sex. But not only that. We need to understand how our contingent cultural understandings of sex fit into the grooves of our more basic nature as sexual, embodied and desirous creatures, hungry to be at once (as Simone de Beauvoir tells us) both subject and object. We need, in other words, to think about why pornography turns us on and makes sense to us: what leads us to this place where we are all too eager to believe that the pornographic world – the 'pornutopia', in Bauer's phrase – is the real world. From this perspective, it seems that pornography's relationship to the subordination and silencing of women is, on Austin's schema, 'at best' perlocutionary – a set of effects only made possible because of the sexual world in which we already find ourselves. If so, then Langton and others will not be able to vindicate their claim that pornography essentially subordinates and silences women.

Surely what Bauer says of pornography can be said, with at least some plausibility, of all forms of authority. We can, after all, ask what it is about humans – our fear of chaos, our lust for hierarchy – that makes us invest authority in the state or its particular institutions like the police or the judiciary? These institutions have their authority because we acquiesce to them. This is why revolutions are possible, even if during non-revolutionary periods we tend to think otherwise. Thus Bauer's argument seems to lead to the implausible conclusion that there are no speech acts at all, just words and their perlocutionary effects. But this can't be right. Notice how mealy-mouthed it would be if corrupt legislators, when held to account by the people for unjust laws, were to say: 'Well, *you* were the ones who went along with us, *you* acquiesced, so whatever the effects of our law-making, they are mere perlocutionary effect. We were just talking; you made our talk into something authoritative.' I don't mean to suggest that pornographers are just like legislators: obviously there's some difference. My point is that all authorities, at least all earthly authorities, require our participation for their authority to exist, which in turn presupposes a landscape of human need and desire. And yet we feel it is right to be able to charge certain authorities with responsibility for their speech. It's simply not satisfactory for state authorities to say that they were just talking, and that it is only our acquiescence that made their speech into something done. If state authorities shouldn't be allowed to say this, then why should pornographers? Or, if pornographers are off the hook, why aren't all authorities?

This worry leads us to Bauer's central thought about the pornography debates. As I said, according to the standard reading of Austin, he draws a distinction between the 'literal meaning' of speech and its illocutionary and perlocutionary force. While anti-pornography feminists claim that pornography's badness lies in its illocutionary force, Bauer's argument seems to suggest that all of its badness falls on the perlocutionary side of things. This matters, of course, because within the liberal tradition, free speech is supposed to be free whatever its perlocutionary effects – barring, perhaps, speech that causes direct, serious and obvious harm. How people will respond to some bit of speech, after all, is arbitrarily connected to the speech itself – it's just a matter of contingency. To judge a bit of language on its own terms, we must confine ourselves to thinking about what that bit of language is in itself: its literal meaning and its illocutionary force.

Bauer thinks this standard reading of Austin is deeply confused. On her reading, Austin thought that in an important sense language just is a form of action. The question of what our words mean is inseparable from, and moreover secondary to, the question of what we're doing with our words. And what we do with our words is never wholly determined by our intentions; we speak within a social world, a world structured not only by convention, but also by a certain human alignment of concern, desire and practice. On this picture of language, it's not only the locution/illocution distinction that begins to dissolve. So does the distinction between illocution and perlocution. Austin tells us that if in the right circumstances I say 'I promise to come to the party', I will achieve the act of promising. But, equally, if in the right circumstances I say 'I no longer love you', will I not achieve the breaking of your heart? Austin says that the first case is one of illocution, and the second of perlocution. But the distinction, Bauer insists, is not a deep one. The relationship between my saying I no longer love you and your heart breaking is hardly one of arbitrary contingency; anyone who knows something about people and love and desire will know that my saying this to you 'in the right circumstances' will achieve the breaking of your heart, just as my saying in the right circumstances 'I promise to come to the party' will achieve the act of promising.

Thus Bauer suggests that the question of where to draw the line between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary isn't a theoretical question in the ontology of language, an issue of where the speech act ends and its effects begin. Rather it an *ethical* question, a question of where to assign responsibility. In saying 'I promise to come to the party', I make myself responsible for coming, accountable to you if I don't come. But if I say 'I no longer love you', am I responsible – in the ethical, not just agent sense – for breaking your heart? This is the vital question, and we have it

the wrong way around, Bauer says, if we think that a better ontological theory of illocutions is going to settle it for us.

To get back to pornography, I take it that Bauer would say that the right question isn't what kind of illocutionary act pornography is or isn't, but who should take responsibility for the subordination of women of which pornography plays a part. The pornographers? The consumers of pornography? The media? Schools? All men? All of us? If my reading is correct, then on Bauer's view the problem with insisting that pornography is an illocutionary act of subordination isn't quite that it's false but that it's too ethically easy. Bauer fears that we risk scapegoating pornography, obscuring difficult questions about how moral responsibility is to be located in a system of multiple and overdetermining forces. To return to the boy who sexually assaults his girlfriend, by allowing him to say that pornography authorised his abhorrent action we divest him of authority over his own action, allowing him to sidestep the responsibility that all mature persons must take over their choices. Bauer's point then isn't really that pornography has no authority, but that our choice of how to talk about pornography's authority must be guided ultimately by ethical considerations: who is and should be held responsible.

The fear, of course, is that if the ontology of language is hard, the ethics of sexuality is even harder. Perhaps Bauer is right that we are kidding ourselves when we say that a better grasp on the illocutionary dimensions of pornography will allow us to make better judgments about its moral valence. But are we any better off tackling the ethical question head-on? And how are we to do that? Bauer's answer is, I think, that we need to start with what she calls a "more candid phenomenology" of pornography (6). We need to attend more carefully to the particularities of pornography and the role it plays not just in culture generally, but in individual people's lives, including our own. As philosophers, and feminists, we might want more than this. Specifically we might very well want an answer to our question: is pornography essentially harmful to women? But such an answer isn't forthcoming in Bauer's book. Instead what we are offered is a tentative vision of how we might go about answering that question for ourselves.

### 3.

Bauer's second problem of 'authority' has to do not with the authority of pornography but with the authority of philosophy. These aren't as distinct issues as one might think, at least on Bauer's view. Insofar as pornography has authority, it's because pornography makes sexual sense to people: it hooks in with their desires, it gives voice to their fantasies – it, in short, turns them on. And insofar as philosophy

has authority, Bauer argues, it's because philosophy does the same. This will come as a surprise to those philosophers (I imagine most) who think that philosophy's authority rests on its particular relationship to reason. Surely philosophy has authority insofar as it is seriously committed to the enterprise of truth-seeking and the canons of good reasoning that yield the truth. But Bauer thinks this is a mistake; philosophy's authority rests on its capacity to turn people on, not on its special relationship to reason. Or rather, it *would* so rest, if philosophy had not lost its cultural authority. Bauer detects just this mistake in the work of feminist philosophers like Langton and Hornsby, who (Bauer says) take it for granted that the best way to serve the goals of political feminism is to 'bolster' traditional feminist views with clear and rigorous argument. Bauer takes it as self-evident that this project, however much it might turn on philosophers, does little to turn on anyone else. Most people are unpersuaded by what Catharine MacKinnon has to say about pornography, Bauer claims, not because they are confused by MacKinnon's arguments, but because they think her conclusions are just obviously wrongheaded. This means, in turn, that the projects of many 'feminist philosophers' cannot be properly counted as feminist, for they are overly concerned with theorising the world at the expense of transforming it.

What notion of 'authority' does Bauer have in mind here? As a sociological matter, it might well be true that a philosophy that does not speak to ordinary people's concerns cannot expect to be given much room in a public culture (at least our contemporary public culture). But there is a distinction between power and authority. The question cannot simply be: how do we get people to listen to us? (That is a question of mere power.) The question must instead be: why *should* people listen to us? The conventional answer has been that we as philosophers have a special relationship to reason. It's clear that Bauer does not like that answer, but it's less clear what her alternative is. Moreover, I worry that Bauer is too quick in claiming that the old story has no practical purchase outside philosophy. Langton's famous defence, in her "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts" (1993), of MacKinnon's claim that pornography is an act of subordination and silencing, was not motivated by a philosopher's need to make everything read like the latest issue of *Mind*. Rather, Langton was responding to claims – made not only by philosophers but by judges – that MacKinnon's argument was "philosophically indefensible" (ibid 294) and contained "a certain sleight of hand" (ibid 294). Thus Langton concludes that "[w]hatever grounds one might have for doubting MacKinnon's conclusions, philosophical indefensibility is not among them" (ibid 299).

That said, Bauer is no doubt right that it's all too easy, if you're a philosopher, to confuse theorising the world and transforming it, especially if you work on topics

that are of obvious importance to the world, like sexual objectification or subordination. One of Bauer's points, I take it, is that philosophers need to stop assuming that they are doing something politically important just in virtue of theorising about politically important things. It is not enough to talk about pornography or inequality or race or gender in familiar philosophical ways. One must be sensitive to how one speaks, and the predictable effects of speaking this way, and ask oneself: why speak this way, and to whom, and to what end? Or, to take an example outside of feminist philosophy, it is not enough to notice that the existence of borderline cases poses some important problems in the world – problems, for example, having to do with the moral status of foetuses or when a juvenile becomes a legal adult – and to conclude that theorising about vagueness is of general cultural importance. For when we get down to dealing with the real difficulties of borderline cases – not in the classroom, but in the courtroom – we don't, Bauer says, think about different theories of vagueness; instead, we accept the inevitability of vagueness, and ask ourselves how we can best come to some practical accommodation with it.

I suspect that many philosophers are happy to admit that their philosophising lacks any worldly import – in the sense of helping ordinary people grapple with their worlds – and I think we make a serious mistake about our discipline if we forget this. I worry that Bauer herself is at risk of forgetting this. But in any case this isn't the kind of philosophy that much interests Bauer, and I take it this isn't her main target. Her main target isn't the philosopher who is contented with her cool abstracta and dexterous puzzle-solving, but the philosopher who thinks she is doing something of worldly importance, but is actually engaged in an enterprise that is fundamentally shallow and insignificant. To avoid the latter sin, Bauer argues, we must pay more attention to what we as philosophers are doing with our words.

4.

So, what does Bauer think we *should* be doing with our words, at least those of us who want to recover a philosophy that is more world-directed? I read in Bauer's book two different answers to this question, answers that I think stand in some tension with each other. On the one hand Bauer recalls to us Socrates, who famously suggested that the value of philosophy lies in its ability to "get people to see the value in attending to and questioning their settled understanding of what they are doing in and with their lives" (118). I take it that this is a familiar picture of philosophy's usefulness, one that philosophers often call on when pressed to explain why the teaching of philosophy is important. We say that, as philosophers, we don't have any proprietary content, no particularly well-founded theory, to offer our



students. Instead what we do is teach them how to think, and (ideally) make them fall in love with the practice of thinking. We charge individuals with a responsibility over their own minds, and their own lives, and thereby call them to a more fully human life.

That this vision of philosophy is something of a platitude within our discipline explains in part my discomfort with it. Most philosophers would agree, after all, that philosophy in its essence is a call for thinking, that to be a philosopher is to take up responsibility for one's own mind. And yet that vision sits quite easily side-by-side with the kind of inward-looking, scientific philosophy of which Bauer disapproves. This is because on the conventional story that analytic philosophy tells about itself, what it is to think well for oneself is not really up to oneself; the communal standards of philosophical practitioners set the criteria for good, rational thinking, in just the way that the communal standards of science set the criteria for good scientific inquiry. To say with Socrates, in other words, that philosophy calls on one to take responsibility for one's own mind, isn't yet to upset the dominant self-conception of analytic philosophy.

More radical here, I think, is an alternative metaphilosophical vision that I detect in Bauer's book. That vision has less to do with the relationship between philosophy and thinking, and more to do with the relationship between philosophy and saying. In addition to the figure of Socrates, Bauer sometimes aligns philosophy with the figure of the artist or critic, the person who attends to her experience in its own idiosyncratic particularity, but makes a claim for its universality. The result is a performance or a critical judgment that may or may not work. We might look at a work of art, or a critical essay about a work of art, and 'get it', or we might not get it at all. If we don't get it, we will think that the artist or critic has claimed for herself an illegitimate authority, has falsely elevated her own idiosyncrasy to the level of the universal – she has been, in other words, a failed artist or critic. If we do get it, we will think that her claim to universality was legitimate, that there is in fact some intimacy between the world as she sees it and the world we all share. The artist or critic always takes authority before she has it, and so is always potentially doing something illegitimate. But if she gets it right – that is, if she is able to move us – then it turns out that her action was not illegitimate, was in fact authoritative all along.

I find this a more compelling vision of what it might mean to do philosophy. The best philosophers, after all, have shown us how things look to them, in a way that might very well have fallen flat, failed to fit into the grooves of human understanding, but that, precisely because we do get it, seems to us to get it right.

This is as true of Plato or Kant as of Catharine MacKinnon or Judith Butler. Their philosophical contributions don't simply lie in the cranking of the reason machine, or even in their capacity to inspire us to think for ourselves. Their philosophical contributions, like all the best creative contributions, offer us a way of seeing the world that makes sense to (some of) us. That their worldviews might have found no such purchase – that we might have found concepts like performativity, sexual harassment, the forms, the transcendental, empty or confused – this is the risk that is central to philosophising. Philosophers use words, often in strange and novel ways, and hope that their doing so makes sense to those with whom they share their language. The best philosophers, in other words, recognise the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the universal and the particular. They do not seek merely to organise the particulars under various universal concepts. They also ask themselves how the universals can be changed and shifted to better fit with the particulars.

This of course isn't something that just philosophers do. Imagine the woman who, sixty years ago, says she has been raped by her husband. Others reassure her that this is a conceptual impossibility, for one cannot be raped by one's husband. Perhaps she is silenced. Or perhaps she continues to say, incoherently, that her husband has raped her. In so doing she shows other women what they might do with their words, how to describe the particulars of their experience, particulars that never sat properly with the universal categories they were taught to apply to them. Eventually we can imagine the universal *rape* coming to include marital rape: the incoherent becomes the true, and finally the commonplace. When the woman first says that her husband raped her, she puts herself at obvious risk: of being beaten, locked up, derided, raped again. But she also puts herself at the risk of trying to do something with her words that will not be understood, that no one will 'get'. In saying that she was raped by her husband, she charges herself with the authority to categorise that particular, her rape, under that universal, *rape*, and in so doing takes responsibility for this novel categorisation. Whether she will turn out to have had the requisite authority will depend on who is listening, and how closely.

I read Bauer's book, ultimately, as suggesting that as philosophers we should be braver about taking such risks, of challenging the universal with the force of the recalcitrant particular. And to do this we must start by being more attentive to the particular, recalling its authority over the universal. We must in other words care more about experience: not just the experiences of other, ordinary people, for whom certain 'philosophical' questions are all too untheoretical, but also our own experience.

This emphasis on the importance of ‘getting it’ to philosophy can seem to cut against the democratic vision of philosophy as the home of universal reason, something that we can all get right just by trying hard enough. And I think it does. The view of the philosopher as an artist or a critic who attempts to elevate her own contingent ways of seeing to the level of the universal – this is not a democratic vision of philosophy. Indeed, it’s in part the fear of the anti-democratic potential of this vision that lead early analytic philosophers like Carnap to articulate an opposing, more scientific vision, that of a discipline based in a community of practitioners oriented toward a common goal, working within a common language, each adding his small contribution to the growing mass of knowledge. On this vision of philosophy, turning people on is not only unimportant; it’s downright dangerous. After all, pornography turns people on, but to do so it must reflect some of what is ugliest about us. A philosophy that seeks to turn people on might, we fear, have to do the same. Better then to have an unsexy philosophy, slow and plodding and cumulative, its rewards hard-won, its pleasures never easy.

At the same time, the notion of ‘getting it’ in philosophy seems vital for a genuinely political philosophy – a philosophy that is not merely about politics, but is also in service of politics. As the examples of *sexual harassment* or *silencing* indicate, one of the ways that philosophy can serve politics is by creating new concepts to name unspoken phenomena. Wittgenstein famously said that the child learns pain language by falling and having adults rush to him and cajole. At its best, philosophy give us new language for our pain. The test here is not whether this new language cuts nature at its joints, but whether it speaks to us. Importantly, there is no guarantee that everyone will ‘get it’ – there is no human nature thick enough for that. Not everyone will find it useful to use the words ‘sexual harassment’ or ‘silencing’ or ‘subordination’ to speak about the world. For some lucky people, those words won’t seem to describe the world at all. But that not everyone understands what you propose to do with words is not reason to return to the old ways of speaking. This is not a metaphysical point, but again, an ethical one. In contexts of massive inequality and difference – that is, in real-life contexts – we can’t expect everyone to ‘get it’. We cannot expect all people to get what feminists or anti-racists or anti-colonialists or labour activists are doing with their words. We can only hope that enough people get it. A genuinely political philosophy needs to accept that universal human reason will only get us so far. It’s not enough just to get it right; we also need to simply get it.

In other words, I'm suggesting that as we seek to transform philosophy into a more ethical practice, as many of us are trying to do, we should resist the temptation to flatten it out, to leave in it no room for talk of insight, creativity, style, originality or (dare I say) brilliance. We must leave room for the idea that some people 'get it', and some people don't. We must leave room for the idea that sometimes we don't need another crank of the reason machine, but a radical conceptual reorganisation in light of actual human experience. Flattening philosophy into a democratised sphere of pure reason might bring with it the familiar comforts of liberalism. But it does not make possible a discipline endowed with real moral power. For that we will have to be fearless not only in using our words, but, as Bauer suggests, in doing things with them.

## Work Cited

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