# *The Practice of Value*

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# I. SOCIAL DEPENDENCE WITHOUT RELATIVISM

## 1. The Landscape

"Man is the measure of all things; of what is, that it is; of what is not, that it is not," said Protagoras, launching one of those philosophical ideas that reverberate through the centuries, acquiring meanings of their own or providing inspiration for various doctrines, some quite removed from their originator's. "Man is the measure" is such an idea, a thought that many, not only philosophers, find irresistible, while others find in it nothing but confusion.

Even though I will not follow Protagoras's views,[1] the spirit of his maxim will hover over these lectures. My concern, though, will not be with all things, only the value or disvalue of things. Is Man the measure of value? Clearly not, where what is of instrumental value only is concerned. Things are of mere instrumental value when their value is entirely due to the value of what they bring about, or to the value of what they are likely to bring about or may be used to bring about. The instrumental value of things is at least in part a product of how things are in the world, of the causal powers of things. These lectures will consider the case for thinking that Man is the measure of intrinsic value. This narrows the field considerably. For example, the value of the means of personal survival, such as food, shelter, and good health, is merely instrumental.[2]

In matters evaluative Protagoras's maxim seems to dominate our horizon. Its triumph seems to have been the gift, or the price, depending on your point of view, of secularism and of the rise of a worldview dominated by the physical sciences. But in what way exactly do values depend on us? That is not a straightforward question, and the history of philosophy is littered with a vast array of very different answers.

[1] Whose interpretation is in dispute. He is taken to be a subjectivist, believing that whatever one believes is true for one, or an objectivist, holding that whatever anyone believes is true, or (by Plato in *Theaetetus* 177b) a relativist, holding that whatever the city decides is just is just in the city. I will not be tempted by any of them.

[2] That is, *qua* means of survival their value is merely instrumental. Those same things may also have value for other reasons.

The view I will explore is most closely related to social relativism, which I reject, and to value pluralism, which I accept. I will emphasise my difference with the first today, and my debt to the second tomorrow. Social relativism, holding that the merit or demerit of actions and other objects of evaluation is relative to the society in which they take place or in which they are judged, is a popular view. Indeed some mild forms of it cannot be denied. Who would deny that in Rome one should behave as the Romans do, at least on a natural understanding of this view, which, among other things, does not take the maxim itself to be socially relative? Such partial or moderate social relativism is surely true in some form or another, and yet it is too tame to do justice to Protagoras's maxim. True, it can take a thorough form, generalising the Roman maxim (normally understood to have restricted application to some kinds of matter only) to all actions, taking the value or rightness of any action to be a function of, say, the practices in its locality. But even so, local relativism[3] is not relativistic through and through. Local standards, those that bind only members of some community, are so binding because they are validated by universal principles, not themselves relativistic. Thoroughgoing local relativism makes the application of all nonrelative standards be mediated by others that are socially dependent, and therefore relativistic. But it is still local relativism, in being moored in universal and socially independent principles of value.[4] It does not hold that Man is the measure of all value. Some values remain socially independent, and those that are socially dependent are so because of them.

Radical social relativism goes further. It not only makes the value or rightness of action depend on social factors, it makes all evaluative standards socially relative: they are valid only where they are practised, or they are subject to some other social condition. Radical social relativism

[3] I use the expression "local relativism" to indicate forms of relativism (a) in which the rightness or value of at least some actions is determined by norms that make it dependent on the practices of the place where they were performed or where they are judged; and (b) which include norms whose validity is universal, i.e., they apply timelessly, or to all times and all places. Thoroughgoing local relativism makes the value and rightness of all actions a function of some social practices, but the norms that determine that this is so, or at any rate some of them, are not themselves relative.

[4] These characterisations are precise enough for their purpose here, but admittedly they leave much unclear, much room for further distinctions. My purpose below is to exploit this unclarity to advance the view I find more promising, which can be regarded either as a special variant of local or of radical relativism or as different from either.

risks contradiction, for it has to explain whether the claim that all value is socially relative is itself socially relative.[5]

Some thoroughgoing forms of relativism escape contradiction; to do so it often takes the form of perspectival relativism, taking truth to be truth in or relative to some perspectives.[6] But other problems remain. Radical relativism is charged with making it impossible for us to have the opinions we think we have. We take some of our views to be true absolutely, and not qualified by being relative to a perspective. Similarly, certain disagreements that we believe we have with others are either said not to be disagreements at all or turn out to have a character very different from what we thought they had.

How damaging this point is to radical relativism is a moot question. Radical relativism is a response to a felt crisis that undermines our confidence in evaluative thought due to the persistence of irresolvable disagreements, and other chronic diseases of evaluative thought. Its cure is to reinterpret evaluative thought, preserving much of it, but changing it enough to rid it of its ailments. To complain that the remedy involves change is somewhat ungracious. How else is it meant to work?

And yet the reforming aspect of perspectival relativism makes it an option of last resort. It is a response to a perception of a host of insoluble problems that bedevil evaluative thought and require its reform. What if the problems are illusory? What if their perception is a result of a blinkered theoretical understanding or, rather, misunderstanding of the phenomena? In that case we do not need the cure, with its prescribed amputation of aspects of our evaluative thought. Indeed, we should avoid it as a distortion of a healthy practice.

I will argue for social dependence without relativism, that is, for the view that values, and therefore also reasons, rights, virtues, and other normative phenomena, which depend on them, are socially dependent, but in a way that doesn't involve radical relativism, which does not imply that what is valuable is valuable only in societies that think that it is,

[5] The argument is that if it is not then radical social relativism is false, for at least one standard of value, this one, is not socially relative. If it is socially relative then it is true, but only locally, relative to some societies or some perspectives, and therefore radical relativism is false because it is false that necessarily any standard is true only relative to a society or a perspective. If the standard that says so is nowhere accepted then no standard is relative.

[6] See, for one example, S. D. Hales, "A Consistent Relativism," *Mind* 106 (1997): 33–52.

nor that evaluative or normative concepts, or the truth of propositions about them, are relative.

It would be pleasing to be able to say that unlike relativism the view I will explore explains evaluative thinking without reforming it. But that is not quite so. My hope is, however, that we can dissociate the social dependence of value from relativism, and that in doing so we are better able to explain the basic features of evaluative thinking. The suggestion is that most of what social and perspectival relativism promises to explain is explained by the social dependence of value. Radical relativism is detachable from the thesis of social dependence, and adds no merit to it. We can settle for the less radical and less revisionary view I offer, and remain more faithful to the basic features of our evaluative thinking.[7]

## 2. The Thesis in Brief

### *A. The Thesis*

It is time to put some flesh on the enigmatic remarks made so far. The social dependence of values, or at least the aspect of it that concerns me, can be expressed as the combination of two theses:

> *The special social dependence thesis* claims that some values exist only if there are (or were) social practices sustaining them.
>
> *The (general) social dependence thesis* claims that, with some exceptions, all values depend on social practices either by being subject to the special thesis or through their dependence on values that are subject to the special thesis.

This formulation is vague in various ways. In particular it does little to identify which values are and which are not subject to the theses. I will consider later the reach of the two theses. But first, let us dwell on the special thesis for a moment, using the sort of examples of which it is most likely to be true, without worrying about its reach.

[7] A word of clarification: I introduce the lecture by contrasting my view that follows with relativism. I do not, however, intend to follow with a critique of relativism. The difficulties with relativism have been ably discussed by various writers. My purpose is to expound the virtues of my account of the social dependence of value. I introduce it by highlighting the ways it differs from relativism to preempt any misunderstanding of it as a form of relativism.

Regarding any value there is in any population *a sustaining practice* if people conduct themselves approximately as they would were they to be aware of it, and if they do so out of (an openly avowed) belief that it is worthwhile to conduct themselves as they do (under some description or another).

I identify sustaining practices in this way to allow that the people engaging in them may not be aware of the value their conduct is sustaining, or that they have only a dim and imperfect knowledge of it, or that they mistake it for something else, which is in fact of no value at all, but which leads them to the same conduct to which the value in question, had it been known to them, would have led them. At the same time, sustaining practices cannot consist merely of conduct identical, or close, to the one that the value would lead one to adopt. This coincidence cannot be purely arbitrary. It must result at least from belief in the value of such conduct.

It may be objected that to count as sustaining a value those whose practice it is must have that value as their reason to engage in the practice. This objection misconceives the nature of the thesis. It does not explain some intuitive notion of a sustaining practice. We have only the vaguest intuitive grasp of that notion, and I am using it in a regimented form to make a theoretical point.

The reasons why the weaker condition that I stipulated seems the better one are three. First, it avoids the awkward question of how adequate people's grasp of the nature of the value must be before their practice can be regarded as sustaining it. The difficulty is not that any attempt to set such a test would be vague. The difficulty is that for the purpose of relating value to practice there is no reason to expect a good understanding of the nature of the value. We cannot expect people to come to a correct view of its nature by examining the practice.[8] Therefore, while practices entail common knowledge of their terms, i.e., of what they require, we need not expect the practices to be informed by a good understanding of the values that could justify or make sense of them.

Second, more general values are put into practice through more specific ones, as when we express our respect for freedom by adherence to the value of the rule of law, among others. While I will not discuss these matters in detail, I share the view that it makes sense to say that a

[8] See section C, "Dependence without Conventionalism."

culture or civilisation, or country, respected a general value on the ground that it recognised and sustained in practice many of the more specific values that implement it in the conditions there prevailing. That may be so even if they did not have the concept of the more general value. And if so, it becomes necessary to allow that the sustaining practices of the more specific values sustain the more general one, which they manifest.

Third, as we shall see, values are open to reinterpretation, and to leave that possibility open while maintaining the social dependence thesis we need to leave the relation between value and practice fairly loose and flexible; otherwise the practice will block too many possible reinterpretations.[9]

The examples of opera, intimate friendships, and others show that most often the practices will relate to a set of interrelated values. One may not be able to identify separately practices relating to singing, conducting, etc., in operas. The sustaining practices, which consist of attending operas, music school, listening to CDs, discussing them, writing and reading about them, etc., relate to various aspects of the art, some of which may be related more directly to one or more practices, but which still derive sustenance from all of them.

The dependence of value on practice that the thesis affirms is not simultaneous and continuous. The thesis is that the existence of values depends on the existence of sustaining practices at some point, not that these practices must persist as long as the value does. The usual pattern is for the emergence, out of previous social forms, of a new set of practices, bringing into life a new form: monogamous marriage between partners chosen by each other, the opera, and so on, with their attendant excellences. Once they come into being they remain in existence even if the sustaining practices die out. They can be known even if exclusively from records, they can get forgotten and be rediscovered, and the like. Their meaning may change with time, and I will return to this tomorrow. Sometimes they are kept alive, as it were, by small groups of devotees. The important point is that once they are brought into being through an existing practice they need not ever be lost again, except accidentally, and that regardless of the passing away of their sustaining practices.

You can see now why this form of social dependence does not involve

[9] See Lecture III, section 2 ("Interpretation") below.

social relativism. There is no suggestion that what is of value is so only in societies where the value is appreciated, nor that rights, duties, or virtues exist only where recognised. Once a value comes into being it bears on everything, without restriction. But its existence has social preconditions.

The asymmetry between initial emergence and continued existence lies at the root of the special dependence thesis. It is entrenched in the way we think about cultural values: Greek tragedy was born in a nest of sustaining practices; neither it nor the forms of excellence it brought with it existed before. But they exist now, even though the attendant practices have long since disappeared. Moreover, the theoretical motivations for the social dependence thesis do not require continuous social support. For example, the existence and knowability of values can just as well be explained by reference to practices now defunct, and so can the dependence of values on realisation through valuers. But I have gone ahead of myself. Before I turn to the justification of the thesis a few more clarifications are necessary.

### *B. Dependence without Reduction*

It is sometimes thought that social dependence is a normatively, or ethically, conservative thesis. Since it affirms that value depends on social practices it must, it is concluded, approve of how things are, for according to it all the values by which we judge how things are derive from that very reality. This is a *non sequitur.*

The first point to note is that bads as well as goods are, according to the social dependence thesis, dependent on social practices. The very same social practices that create friendships and their forms of excellence also create forms of disloyalty and betrayal, forms of abuse and exploitation.

If both goods and bads, both positive and negative values, are socially dependent, what determines whether what a practice sustains is a positive or a negative value? Do goods and bads have the character they have because they are taken by participants in the practice to have it? Not quite. The worry arises out of the thought that the social dependence thesis is reductive in nature. That is, it may be thought that it commits one to a two-step procedure: first one identifies a sustaining practice in value-free terms, and then one identifies, by reference to it, the character of the positive or negative value it sustains. Such a procedure seems to me

hopeless. There is no way we can capture the variety and nuance of various concepts of values and disvalues except in evaluative terms, that is, by using some evaluative concepts to explain others. The social dependence thesis is not meant to provide any form of reductive explanation of concepts. Reductive explanations only distort the phenomena to be explained. Evaluative concepts provide ways of classifying events, things, and other matters by their evaluative significance. Nonevaluative classifications, even if they succeed, *per impossibile,* in bringing together everything capable of being identified by nonevaluative criteria, which falls under an evaluative concept, cannot make sense of the reason they are classified together, nor can they sustain counterfactuals and determine what would belong together were things significantly other than they are.[10] Sustaining practices can be identified only in normative language, referring to the very values they sustain.

This claim appears neutral between the concepts of true and of false values. That is, the claim is that value concepts are explained by reference, among other things, to other value concepts, and it seems not to matter whether the concepts used in the explanations are of true or of illusory or false values. But appearances are misleading. Concepts of false values cannot have instances. Schematically speaking, if there is no value V then the concept of V is a concept of a false or illusory value and there is nothing that can have the value V (because there is no such value). We inevitably try to explain any concepts, whether we take them to be of what is real or of the illusory or impossible, by the use of concepts that can have instances. Concepts that cannot have instances do not connect the concepts they are used to explain to the world or to anything in it, and thus they fail to explain them. It is true that to explain the concept of an illusory value we need to point to its connections, should it have such, to other concepts of other illusory values. These concepts are likely to be part of a system of (incoherent or flawed) beliefs, and to understand any of them we need to understand their interrelations. But unless they are also related to concepts that can have instances they remain unattached to anything real, and their understanding is locked in a circle of notions detached from anything possible. To have a better grasp of such concepts we need to relate them to concepts with possible instantiation at least by reference to their aspirations. That is, those concepts are taken

[10] A point first explained by J. McDowell in "Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World," reprinted in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

to be in earnest, in joke, or in fiction related to something real, and we need to understand these aspirational connections to understand the concepts.

Thus people's understanding of concepts generally—and value concepts are no exceptions—depends, among other things, on their understanding of their relation to concepts that can have instances. In the case of value concepts that means that it depends on their understanding of concepts of true values.[11] This establishes that the social dependence thesis is in no way a reductive thesis of evaluative concepts.

We can now see why the charge of conservatism is unjustified. The charge is that the special thesis entails acceptance of what people take to be good practices as good practices, and what they take to be bad practices as bad practices, that it is committed to accepting any practice of any kind of evaluative concept as defining a real good or a real bad, as its practitioners take it to do. To which the answer is that it does not. The existence of a sustaining practice is merely a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for the existence of some kinds of values. The special thesis does not in any way privilege the point of view of any group or culture. It allows one full recourse to the whole of one's conceptual armoury, information, and powers of argumentation in reaching conclusions as to which practices sustain goods and which sustain evil or worthless things, which are, perhaps, taken to be good by a population.[12] Of course, deficiency in our conceptual, informational, and argumentational powers may well make us blind to some goods or lead us to accept some evils. But that must be true in any case. The special dependence thesis would be to blame only if it denied that such limitations lead to mistakes and privileged the concepts or information of some group or culture. But that it does not do.

[11] The implication is that if people come to realise that their understanding of value concepts depends on concepts of false values (e.g., of religious values) they realise that it is defective and has to be revised and reorientated by relating it to concepts of true values. I am inclined to believe that people who have value concepts necessarily have some concepts of true values. But there is no need to consider this question here. The remarks above about the priority of concepts with possible instances are consistent with recognition that people's understanding of concepts they possess can be, and normally is, incomplete. I discussed some of the issues involved in "Two Views of the Nature of the Theory of Law: A Partial Comparison," in *Hart's Postscript,* ed. Jules Coleman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 1–37.

[12] It also allows one to judge that some groups or cultures miss out on some goods, which are not known to them.

*C. Dependence without Conventionalism*

Another objection to the social dependence thesis is that it turns all values into conventional values. However, this objection is based on another unfounded assumption, that if the existence of a value depends on a sustaining practice that practice must be a reason for the value, a reason for why it is a value, or something like that. That is the case with conventional goods, which are goods the value of which derives, at least in part, from the fact that many people value them. I say "at least in part," identifying conventional goods broadly, because this seems to me to conform better with the way we think of conventional goods. Few are purely conventional in the sense that nothing but the fact that people generally value them makes them valuable. Paradigmatically conventional goods, like the good of giving flowers as a mark of affection, have reasons other than the convention. The fragrance, colours, and shapes of flowers are appealing partly for independent reasons and make them appropriate for their conventional role. Most commonly these independent grounds for valuing flowers are themselves culturally dependent; they are not, at least not entirely, a product of our biology. But the cultural dependence of our valuing of flowers because of their colours, shapes, and fragrance is not in itself of the right kind to make their value a conventional value. We would not value them had we not been imbued with culturally transmitted attitudes. But we do not think that the fact that others value them is a reason why lilies are beautiful. However, the fact that others think it appropriate to give flowers for birthdays makes them appropriate birthday presents.

Conventionalism should be distinguished from social dependence. Conventionalism is a normative doctrine, identifying the reasons making what is right or valuable right or valuable. In contrast, social dependence is, if you like, a metaphysical thesis, about a necessary condition for the existence of (some) values. This does not mean that the existence of values is a brute fact, which cannot be explained. It can be explained in two complementary ways. On the one hand, there may be a historical explanation for the emergence and fate of the sustaining practices. Why did opera emerge when it did, etc.? On the other hand, there will be normative explanations of why operatic excellence is a genuine form of excellence. That explanation is, however, none other than the familiar explanation of why anything of value is of value: it points to the value of the form in combining music, dance, visual display, acting, and words,

in providing a form for a heightened characterisation of central human experiences, or whatever.

With these clarifications behind us, let's turn to the reasons for the social dependence thesis.

## 3. Justifying Considerations

### *A. The Dependence of Values on Valuers*

Four considerations, or clusters of considerations, support the social dependence of values. (1) It offers a promising route toward an explanation of the existence of values. (2) It points to a ready explanation of how we can know about them. (3) It accounts for the deeply entrenched common belief that there is no point to value without valuers. No point to beauty without people, or other valuers, who can appreciate it. No point to the value of love without lovers. No point in the value of truth without potential knowers. (4) Finally, and most importantly, it fits the basic structures of our evaluative thinking.

All four considerations support the social dependence of value. None of them requires relativism. So far as they are concerned radical relativism is to be embraced only if it is the inevitable result of the social dependence of value. But that, as we shall see, it is not.

The brief discussion that follows concentrates on the last two considerations, only occasionally touching on the others. Let me start with what I take to be the fundamental thought, namely that values depend on valuers.

The thought is so familiar that it is difficult to catch it in words, difficult to express it accurately. It is also one that can be easily misunderstood and is often exaggerated. Perhaps one way to put it is that values without valuers are pointless. I do not mean that without valuers nothing can be of value. The idea is that the point of values is realised when it is possible to appreciate them, and when it is possible to relate to objects of value in ways appropriate to their value. Absent that possibility the objects may exist, and they may be of value, but there is not much point to that.

Think of something of value. Not only is the appropriate response to it to respect it and to engage with it in virtue of that value, but absent this response its value is somehow unrealised. It remains unfulfilled.

The goodness of a good fruit is unrealised if it is not enjoyed in the eating.[13] The same sense of lack of fulfillment applies to a novel destined never to be read, a painting never to be seen, and so on. Not all good things can be thought of in that way. The thought does not quite work for my wonderful friendship with John that is destined never to come about. There is no similar sense of waste here,[14] or of something missing its fulfilment.[15] In such cases the thing of value does not yet exist. Only things of value that exist can remain unfulfilled. Nothing is unfulfilled simply because something of value could exist and does not.

That the value of objects of value remains unfulfilled, if not valued, is explained and further supported by a familiar fact. That an object has value can have an impact on how things are in the world only through being recognised. The normal and appropriate way in which the value of things influences matters in the world is by being appreciated, that is, respected and engaged with because they are realised to be of value. Sometimes the influence is different: realising the value of something, some may wish to make sure that others do not have access to it, or they may destroy it or abuse it, or act in a variety of other ways. But all these cases confirm the general thought, namely that the value of things is inert, with no influence except through being recognised.

Values depend on valuers for their realisation, for the value of objects with value is fulfilled only through being appreciated and is, rhetorically speaking, wasted if not appreciated. That explains the view that there is no point to the value of things of value without there being valuers to appreciate them, and it lends it considerable support. The view I have started defending is now but a short step away.

My claim was not only that the value of particular objects is pointless without valuers, but that the existence of values themselves is pointless without valuers. The thought is now fairly clear: what point can there be in the existence of values if there is no point in their instantiation in objects of value? If this is indeed a rhetorical question my case is made.

[13] I refer to the fruit's intrinsic value as a source of pleasure. The same point can be made of its instrumental value as a source of nourishment.

[14] The notion of waste imports more than just that a good was unrealised, that its value remained unfulfilled. It suggests inappropriate conduct, letting the good remain unrealised in circumstances where this should not have happened. I do not mean to imply that this is generally true of cases where the good is not realised.

[15] If I or John never have friends at all it may be that we are unfulfilled, that our lives are lacking. But that is simply because our lives (or we) would be better if we had friends. The point I am making in the text above is different, though reciprocal. It concerns not the good (or well-being) of valuers, but the goodness of objects with value.

One final consideration may be added here. It is constitutive of values that they can be appreciated and engaged with by valuers. This is plain with cultural values, by which I mean the values of products of cultural activities. It is a criticism of, say, a novel that it cannot be understood. If true, it is a criticism of serial music that people cannot appreciate it and engage with it. This consideration is less obvious with regard to other values, such as the beauty of waterfalls. But it is not surprising, nor accidental, that they are all capable of being appreciated by people. None of this amounts to a conclusive argument for the pointlessness of values without valuers. But it all supports that conclusion.

The dependence of values on valuers does not by any means prove the social dependence thesis. One reaction to the argument so far is to separate access to values from the existence of values. The ability to appreciate and to engage with many values presupposes familiarity with a culture. Typically appreciating them and engaging with them will require possession of appropriate concepts, and concepts are, if you like, cultural products. We have to admit, one would argue, that the existence of sublime mountains is independent of social practice, as is their beauty (unless it is the product of land cultivation, pollution, and the like). But appreciation of their beauty requires certain concepts, and certain sensitivities, which are socially dependent. On this view, the social dependence thesis has the wrong target. We should not be concerned with conditions for the existence of value, but with conditions of access to value.

This conclusion is borne out by the fact that the dependence of value on valuers must be expressed in terms of the pointlessness of values without valuers, rather than anything to do with their existence.

### *B. Temporal Elements in Our Value Concepts*

Yet there may be a case for going further than the relatively uncontroversial social dependence of access. The social dependence of (some kinds of) values appears to be enshrined in the structure of much evaluative thought. It is easiest to illustrate with regard to values that are subject to the special dependence thesis, that is, those that exist only if there was a social practice sustaining them. Here are some examples. It is difficult to deny that opera (the art form) is a historical product that came into being during an identifiable period and did not exist before that. Its creation and continued existence is made possible by the existence (at one

time or another) of fairly complex social practices. The same goes for states, and for intimate friendships (e.g., of the kind associated, though not exclusively, with some ideals of marriage), and in general for all art forms, and for all kinds of political structures and social relations.[16] It is therefore also natural to think that *the excellence* of operas (or excellence in directing or conducting operas, etc.), the *excellence* of the law *qua* law (say the virtue of the rule of law or of possessing legitimate authority as the law claims to do), and the *excellence* of a close friendship (as well as virtue as a close friend) depend on the very same social practices on which the existence of opera, intimate friendships, or the law depends.

The thought that the excellences specific to opera and those specific to intimate friendship, or the state, depend on the social practices that sustain them, and that they depend on them in the same way and to the same degree that the existence of the opera, intimate friendship, and the state does, is reinforced by various commonsensical observations: Could it be that the excellence of Jewish humour existed before the Jewish people? Does it make sense to think of the transformation of the string quartet by Joseph Haydn as a discovery of a form of excellence that no one noticed before?

A further thought reinforces this conclusion. The very idea of opera, friendship, or the state is a normative idea in that we understand the concept of an opera or of friendship or of the state in part by understanding what a good opera is like, or a good or successful friendship, or a good state. When we think of the state, as a creature of law, then the fact that the state claims supreme and comprehensive authority is part of what makes a social institution into a state.[17] The concept of the state is (among much else) the concept of a political organisation claiming supreme authority. It is, therefore, the concept of a political organisa-

[16] Of these the temptation to deny dependence on social practices may be greatest with regard to intimate friendship. All one needs for that, some will say, is to have the appropriate emotion toward the other and be willing to act accordingly (when the emotion and willingness are reciprocated). But both the emotion and the actions appropriate to it are socially determined, and cannot be otherwise. I have argued for this view in *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 308–13.

[17] The thesis that the state is constituted by a legal order was forcefully advanced by Hans Kelsen in his book *A General Theory of State and Law* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1945). John Finnis has argued the case for the normative character of the concept of the law in his *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1980), chapter 1. In *Practical Reason and Norms* (1975; 2nd ed.: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 5, I argued that the law is a normative system claiming authority that is both comprehensive and supreme.

tion that is good only if it has the authority it claims. Its specific form of excellence determines the nature of the state.[18]

Opera, friendship, and other art forms and social forms are more fluid. But they too are to be understood, in part, by their specific virtues. Some art forms are rigid, and rigidly defined, as are Byzantine icons. Most are fluid, and their concept allows for a variety of forms, for realisation in different traditions and in different manners. Quite commonly it also allows for the continuous transformation of the genre. Even so, mastering the concept of any specific art form requires an understanding of normative standards specific to it. Opera, to give but one example, is nothing if not an art form where success depends on success in integrating words and music, such that the meaning of the work, or of parts of it, is enriched by the interrelation of word and music. This of course leaves vast spaces for further specification, articulation, and dispute. Not least it leaves unspecified the way in which music and words have to be related. But it is not empty: it imposes constraints on success in opera, and through this on the concept of opera.

The tendency of some disputes about the quality of art works to turn into doubts about whether they are art at all manifests both the dependence of the concept of art and of different art genres on normative standards and the fluidity of those standards, which makes it possible for artists to challenge some of them at any given time by defying them in practice. The same is true of the state, or of friendship: some friendships are so bad that they are no friendships at all.

If forms of art and forms of social relations and of political organisation are constituted in part by standards for their success, then the thought that the creation of these art forms and of these political organisations is also the creation or emergence of these forms of excellence, while still obscure, seems almost compelling. As art forms, social relations, and political structures are created by, or at any rate their existence depends on, social practices, so must their distinctive virtues and

[18] The claim made here that a normative standard and a form of excellence are part of the concept of the state does not entail that they are part of the necessary conditions for something being a state that it meets those standards. To be a state it needs to claim legitimate comprehensive authority, not to have one. However, as I point out below, at least some concepts allow for something like that. Of some kinds it is the case that objects can belong to them by degrees: this is more of a K than that, we can say. It is more of a holiday than the one we had last year, etc. In such cases the excellence of the kind commonly contributes to the determination of degrees of membership in it. And commonly there is a vague boundary between being a very bad member of the kind and not being a member at all.

forms of excellence depend on social practices that create and sustain them. In these cases, it would seem that not only access to these values but the values themselves arise with the social forms that make their instantiation possible. Similar arguments can show, the suggestion is, that the same is true of many other values.

## 4. Limits of the Special Thesis

So far I have tried to describe and motivate the social dependence thesis, and in particular the special thesis. It is time to say something about its scope and limitations.

The special dependence thesis seems to apply primarily to what we may call cultural values, meaning those values instantiation of which generally depends on people who have the concept of the value, or of some fairly closely related value, acting for the reason that their action or its consequences will instantiate it or make its instantiation more likely. In plain English these are values that people need to know at least something about and to pursue in order for there to be objects with those values. They need to engage in relations with the idea that they want to be good friends, make good law in order to make good law, and so on. The excellences of the various forms of artistic activity and creativity, the values associated with the various leisure pursuits, and the goods of various forms of social institutions, roles, and activities relating to them and of various personal relations are all instances of cultural values. The special dependence thesis applies to them because sustaining practices are a necessary condition for it to be possible for these values to be instantiated, and the possibility of instantiation is a condition for the existence of values.

Four important classes of values are not subject to the special thesis. They are values the possibility of whose instantiation does not depend on a sustaining practice.

1. Pure sensual and perceptual pleasure. Sensual and perceptual pleasures are at the root of many cultural pleasures, but their pure form—the value of the pleasure of some sensations or perceptions—is not subject to the special thesis.
2. Aesthetic values of natural phenomena, such as the beauty of

sunsets. As was noted before, access to them is cultural-dependent, but their existence is not.

3. Many, though not all, enabling and facilitating values: these are values whose good is in making possible or facilitating the instantiation of other values. Take, for example, freedom, understood as the value of being in a condition in which one is free to act.... People can be free without anyone realising that they are free. No sustaining practice is necessary to make it possible for people to be free. I call freedom an enabling value, for its point is to enable people to have a life, that is, to act pursuing various valuable objectives of their choice.

Many moral values are of this kind, though some are more complex in nature. For example, justice is an enabling value, in that denial of justice denies people the enjoyment or pursuit of valuable options or conditions, but it can also be an element of the value of relationships, in that treating the other unjustly is inconsistent with them. Those relationships are subject to the special thesis, but justice as a condition in which one is not treated unjustly is not.[19]

4. The value of people, and of other valuers who are valuable in themselves, that is, the identification of who has value in him- or herself does not depend on sustaining practices.

Moral values, and the virtues, rights, and duties that depend on them, often belong to the last two categories and are thus not directly subject to the special thesis. They are, however, at least partially dependent on social practices indirectly. This is most obvious in the case of enabling values: their point is to enable the pursuit and realisation of others, and to the extent that the others are socially dependent, so are they, at least in their point and purpose.

A similar point applies to the value of people or of valuers generally. The whole point of being a valuer is that one can appreciate and respect values, and to the extent that they are socially dependent there is no point to being a valuer, unless there are sustaining practices making possible the existence of values.

[19] According to many views freedom too is not merely an enabling value but a component of other values as well.

Does that mean that values of these two categories are subject to the general thesis, at least in part, that is, at least to the extent that they depend for their point on values that are subject to the special thesis? To answer this question we need to disambiguate the general thesis. As phrased the special thesis is about the existence of some values. The general thesis merely refers to values "depending" on others. Do they so depend for their existence or for their point? I think that for the purpose of providing a general account of values the more significant thesis is the one that focuses on the fact that (with the exception of pure sensual pleasures and the aesthetic values of natural objects)[20] all values depend for their point on the existence of values that are subject to the special thesis.[21]

In discussing the dependence of values on valuers I noted the case for a thesis that there is no point to values without a socially dependent access to them. In many ways that is a more attractive thesis, for there is some awkwardness in thinking of values as existing at all. For reasons I went on to explain it seemed to me that that cultural values are conceived in ways that presuppose that they have temporal existence. They are subject to the special thesis. There is less reason to attribute temporal existence to the values that are not subject to it. We think of them as atemporal, or as eternal. What matters, however, is that they have a point only under certain circumstances. For most values their point depends on it being possible to recognise them and engage with them. They are idle and serve no purpose if this is impossible. In this sense the value of valuers depends on other values, for what is special about valuers *qua* valuers is their ability to engage with values. The point of enabling values is that they enable people to engage with other values. They depend for their point on there being such other values. In these ways values of these categories are partially subject to the (general) social thesis.

They are only partially subject to it, for not all other values are subject to the special thesis, and therefore the values depending on it indirectly are not entirely dependent on it. But the values that can give a meaning and a purpose to life are socially dependent. The purely sensual and perceptual pleasures are momentary pleasures; only when they are

[20] And access to those largely depends on social practices.

[21] Which is not to deny that there are some values whose existence depends on the existence of others, and that singling them out may be relevant for some purposes.

integrated within cultural values and become constituent parts of them can they become an important part of people's lives, only then can they give meaning to people's lives, and the same is true of enjoyment of the beauty of nature. Moreover, the same is true of moral requirements and virtues that are not also parts of social relations or of institutional involvement. Being a teacher, or a doctor, or even a philosopher can contribute significantly to a meaningful life. But being a nonmurderer, or a nonrapist, or a person who simply gives away to others everything he or she has (having acquired it like manna from heaven) is not something that can give meaning to life. In sum: the life-building values are socially dependent, directly or indirectly.

Time to stop. Today I tried to delineate some of the outlines of and motivation for a view of the social dependence of values, which is free from relativism, Tomorrow I hope that some of its merits will emerge through a discussion of its relations to value-pluralism, to interpretation, and to evaluative change.

## II. THE IMPLICATIONS OF VALUE PLURALISM

### 1. Specific and General Values

Evaluative explanations travel up and down in levels of generality. Sometimes we explain the nature of relatively general values by the way they generalise aspects of more specific ones. We explain the nature of relatively specific values by the way they combine, thus providing for the realisation of different, more general ones. For example, we can explain the value of friendship, which is a fairly general value standing for whatever is of value in one-on-one human relationships of one kind or another that are relatively stable and at least not totally instrumental in character, by reference to the more specific, to the value of various specific types of relationships. Thus, the value of friendship in general is explained by reference to the relatively distinct values of intimate friendships, of work friendships, of friendships based on common interests, and so on. On the other hand, we can explain the value of tragedies by reference to more general literary, performance, and cognitive values that they characteristically combine.

The more general the values, the less appealing appears the thesis of their social dependence. The more specific the values, the more appealing it appears, but at the same time the more prone we are to doubt whether these relatively specific values are really distinct values. These doubts are easily explained. Let me start with a quick word about more general values, like beauty, social harmony, love. We doubt whether there are practices sustaining such values, for their very generality challenges our common expectations of what practices are like. They are, we think, patterns of conduct performing and approving of the performance of, and disapproving failure to perform, actions of a rather specific type in fairly specific circumstances. Things like the practice of annually giving 10% of one's earnings to charity.[1] We do not think of people's behaviour toward issues involving beauty as a practice, for there is no specific action-type, performance or approval of which can constitute the practice of beauty, so to speak.

Our appreciation of beauty can be manifested by almost any conceivable action under some circumstance or other. In large part, the practices sustaining more general values are those that sustain relatively specific values that instantiate these general values (among others). Of course, the general value can be instantiated in new ways, not yet known, as well. Its scope is not exhausted by the scope of its sustaining practices. That the existing practices sustaining specific values through which a more general value is sustained do not address all possible applications of the general value does not detract from the practice counting as sustaining that value, though it may show that people have not recognised, or not recognised adequately, the general value that the practices support.

Turning to more specific values, the doubts change. Here we tend to accept that there are sustaining social practices, but we may doubt whether there are distinct values that they sustain. Is there any sense, one may ask, in regarding the psychological thriller as embodying a distinct form of excellence, and therefore a distinct value, different from that which is embodied in romantic comedies, for example? Is it not the case that both psychological thrillers and romantic comedies are good or bad to the extent that they succeed or fail in embodying general values, such as being entertaining, insightful, beautiful to watch, etc.?

[1] This is particularly clear if one conceives of a practice along the lines of H. L. A. Hart's explanation of social rules in *The Concept of Law* (1961; 2nd ed. 1994).

I have to admit that when referring to values *as values,* which mercifully we do not do too often, we have in mind fairly general values like freedom, beauty, dignity, or happiness. However, it is impossible to understand the value of everything that has some value as merely an instantiation of one or more of these general values. What is good about romantic comedies is not just that they are optimistic, generous about people, well-plotted, etc. (and not even all of these are very abstract values) but also the special way in which they combine these qualities, which may be all that distinguishes some romantic comedies from some domestic dramas, which otherwise may display the same values. Many specific values, specific forms of excellence, have this structure: objects belonging to the relevant kind instantiate that relatively specific value if they combine various other values in a particular way. They are distinct values because of the special mix of values they are. When talking of genres—or of kinds—constituting values I will have such values in mind.

The concept of a genre or a kind of value combines two features: it defines which objects belong to it, and in doing so it determines that the value of the object is to be assessed (*inter alia*) by its relations to the defining standards of the genre.

Each literary or artistic genre or subgenre is defined by a standard, more or less loosely determined, setting the criteria for success in the genre, the criteria for being a good instance of the genre. The standard of excellence set by each genre is identified not only by the general values that go to make it, but by their mix, the nature of their "ideal" combination. This is not to deny that there usually are also other criteria definitive of genres and other criteria for being an instance of a genre (like ending with a wedding).[2]

Some may object to the suggestion that all appreciation in literature, music, and the visual arts is genre-dependent. In any case a serious question arises whether these conclusions can be generalised outside the arts, even assuming that I am right about them.

Do we still rely on genre in the evaluation of works of literature, art,

[2] Is it not necessary that there be additional criteria for belonging to a genre? Not so. Some genres may be such that any item belongs to them if, were it to belong to them and be judged by their standard of excellence, it would be ranked higher than if it were to belong and be judged by the standard of any alternative genre. In such cases the value specific for the genre provides the specific content for the criterion of being an instance of the genre. But this is a special case, and most genres have additional criteria of membership, though relative success may be one of the criteria.

or music? Have not composers abandoned the categories of symphony, concerto, etc.? Have not the boundaries of novel, novella, short story been eroded? Has not the very distinction between a narrative of fact and fiction been successfully challenged? In any case, can one hope to detect genre-based thinking outside the understanding and appraisal of literature and the arts?

These doubts are exaggerated. It is true that writers and composers have broken loose from the hold of what we may call traditional genres. It is also true that the process was not one of replacing new genres with old ones, at least not if genres are understood as imposing the same stringent rules that the old ones obeyed.[3] We are in a period of greater fluidity and flexibility. But that does not mean that evaluative thought in general is not genre-based. That notion allows for all these flexibilities.

I have contributed to the misunderstanding on which the objection is based by using the term "genre," alluding to formal musical and literary genres. It seemed helpful to start with an analogy to a familiar application of what I call genre-based or kind-based thought, namely its application to works that fall squarely within the boundaries of a specific and fairly well-defined genre, such as a Shakespearean sonnet, or a sonata form, or a portrait painting. It is time to abandon the analogy and allow for the full flexibility and complexity of the idea.

Its gist is in the two-stage process of evaluation: we judge the value of objects by reference to their value or success as members of kinds of goods. Is this a good apple? we ask. Or, did you have a good holiday? Was it a good party? Was it a good lecture? Is he a good father? In all these cases the noun ("apple," "party," etc.) does more than help in identifying the object, event, or act to be judged. It identifies the way it is to be judged.[4] This object has some value because it is a good apple; it was

[3] The failure of twelve-tone technique to take hold is an instructive example.

[4] Evaluation with reference to kinds has, of course, been often discussed by philosophers. For example, J. Urmson in "On Grading," *Mind* n.s. 59, no. 234 (April 1950): 145–69, and *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* (London: Hutchinson, 1968) used it to introduce an element of objectivity into evaluative thought at a time when emotivism seemed to reign; Philippa Foot, in *Virtues and Vices, and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1978), relied on it to establish the relativity of evaluations to points of view, as part of a rejection of universalist ethical views such as utilitarianism. See also Georg von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), for a more complex view. The view explained here differs from theirs by (1) claiming that objects can relate to kinds in a variety of ways, of which exemplification is only one; and (2) allowing for detachment, that is, for transition from good of a kind to good, while retaining the umbilical cord to one's kind as the ground for the detached judgment.

time well spent because it was a good party, that is, because the event was good as a party, etc. The habit of evaluating by kinds is so instinctive that we may fail to notice it: it is odd to say, "The lecture was good because it was a good lecture." But that is how it is. The lecturer's activity is of value because it was successful as a lecture. The two-stage procedure is essential to the idea of what I call a genre-based evaluation, and these examples illustrate how pervasive is its application outside the arts.

Perhaps paradoxically, membership in a genre is not, however, essential to the process. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood,* we may say, is neither a novel nor a documentary but creates a new terrain somewhere in between. We then appreciate it in relation to the standards of excellence both of reportage and of novels, judging whether it deviates arbitrarily or sensibly, whether the deviation contributes to its merit or detracts from it. Genre-dependent evaluation is marked by the fact that objects are evaluated by reference to kinds, to genres. But there are different relations they can bear to the genre. Straightforward membership or exemplification of the kind is only one of them. Two elements determine how items can be evaluated. First is the definition of the kinds of goods to which they relate, which includes the constitutive standards of excellence for each kind. Second are the ways the item relates to the kinds. It may fall squarely within them. Or it may, for example, relate to them ironically, or iconoclastically, or as a source of allusions imported into something that essentially belongs to another kind, to create ambiguities, so that the item under discussion enjoys a duck/rabbit effect: you see it belonging to one kind one moment and to another kind the next moment.

Both kinds and ways of relating to them are sustained by social practices and are defined in part by standards of excellence specific to them. Some periods, formal ones, tend to hold kinds rigid, allowing little change, and tend to restrict the ways objects can relate to a kind to a few well-defined patterns. Others, and our time is one of those, allow, even encourage, great fluidity and openness to change in their recognised kinds and a fluid, rich variety of ways in which items can relate to them.[5] But these ways of relating to evaluative kinds or genres are themselves fixed by criteria that explain what they are and how they

[5] Compare the example of fashion, and the different ways of relating to it, discussed in my book *Engaging Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 147–48.

work, and therefore how objects or events that exploit them are to be assessed.

I do not claim that all objects of evaluation are instances of good or bad kinds, nor that all objects that are either good or bad are instances of such kinds, nor that those that are instances of kinds of goods or of bads are evaluated exclusively as instances of the kind. Saying this is merely to repeat the obvious. A novel may be a superb novel and yet immoral for advocating wanton violence, etc.[6] I dwelt on genre- or kind-based values because they illustrate clearly the possibility of social dependence without relativism.

## 2. Diversity without Relativism: The Role of Genre

Value pluralism has become a fairly familiar doctrine in recent times. Its core is the affirmation (a) that there are many distinct values, that is, values that are not merely different manifestations of one supreme value, and (b) that there are incompatible values—incompatible in that they cannot all be realised in the life of a single individual, nor, when we consider values that can be instantiated by societies, can they be realised by a single society. A person or a society that has some of them is necessarily deficient in others. It is commonly understood to mean that the values that we fail to realise, or some of them, are as important as the values that we can realise, and that this is generally true both for individuals and for societies. So that even if individuals and societies are as good as they can be they are not perfect, nor can they be ranked according to the kind of value they exemplify.[7]

In spirit,[8] as I see it, value pluralism is committed to the view that

[6] There is, of course, the familiar claim that being immoral makes the novel bad as a novel. I think that the verdict on this one is: it depends. Sometimes it does, sometimes it does not. It depends on whether the objectionable aspect is well integrated in the work or is relatively isolated within it.

[7] Various alternative understandings of pluralism abound, from mere satisfaction of the first condition above to forms of pluralism that include hostility or competitiveness between supporters of different values. My characterisation of pluralism here is stronger than mere satisfaction of the first condition, for my interest is in those aspects of pluralism that force people to choose among values, force them to give up on some in order to pursue others (at all or to a higher degree).

[8] That is, this feature is not entailed by the two characteristics by which I defined value pluralism, but is assumed by many of its supporters, and is an essential part of their general view of value.

there are many incompatible and yet decent and worthwhile routes through life, and that they are as available to people in other civilisations, and were as available to people in other generations, as they are to us. Such views, which underlie the writings of Isaiah Berlin and of Michael Walzer, to name but two, reject the hubris of the moderns who believe that our ways are superior to those of all other human civilisations. I mention this here because the spirit of value pluralism courts contradiction.

Values are contradictory when one yields the conclusion that something is good, and the other the conclusion that this very thing is, in virtue of the same properties, without value, or even bad. The spirit of pluralism in affirming the value of different cultures, their practices and ideals, runs the risk of affirming contradictory values. Can one affirm value diversity without contradiction? Can one do so without abandoning our critical ability to condemn evaluative beliefs, regardless of their popularity, and regardless of their rootedness in some culture or other?

Relativism handles apparent contradictions by confining the validity of values to particular times and places or to particular perspectives. In doing that, however, social relativism runs the risk of having to recognise the validity of any value that is supported by the practices of a society, so long as no contradiction is involved in the recognition. It has too few resources for criticising the evaluative beliefs of other societies.[9] The social dependence thesis avoids this pitfall. Unlike social relativism it does not hold that social practices limit the application or validity of values. The test of whether something is valuable or not is in argument, using the full range of concepts, information, and rules of inference at our disposal. So far as the soundness of claims of value is concerned, the social dependence of value is neither here nor there. It makes no difference.[10]

Can, one may therefore wonder, the social dependence thesis accommodate the spirit of pluralism?[11] Is it not condemned to judge most

[9] Not that every relativist will acknowledge that as a difficulty. It is a reform of our ways of thinking about values that relativists are committed to.

[10] At least in general it makes no difference. I do not mean to deny the possibility of some views about specific values that are inconsistent with the social dependence thesis, and therefore refuted by it.

[11] The thought of the possibility of accommodation is meant to leave it open whether in any particular case an apparent contradiction is a real contradiction.

apparently contradictory values to be really contradictory? I think that the spirit of pluralism can be accommodated within the framework of the social dependence thesis partly because it can embrace local relativism, as can any other view, but mainly because evaluative thought is so heavily genre- or kind-dependent.

We are intuitively familiar with the phenomenon in our understanding of literature, music, films, art and architecture, and others. But the same applies to values in other domains. We can admire a building and judge it to be an excellent building for its flights of fancy and for its inventiveness. We can admire another for its spare minimalism and rigorous adherence to a simple classical language. We judge both to be excellent. Do we contradict ourselves? Not necessarily, for each displays the virtues of a different architectural genre, let us say romantic and classical.[12]

The vital point is that judgments of merit (and of demerit) proceed in such cases in the two steps discussed earlier: we identify the work as an instance of one genre and judge it by the standards of that genre. If it is a good instance of its genre then it is a good work absolutely, not only good of its kind. Judgments of works as being good of their kind do not yield the appearance of contradiction. No suspicion of contradiction is aroused by judging one church to be an outstanding Byzantine church and another to be a very good Decorative Gothic church, even though conflicting standards are applied in the judgments, that is, even though features that make one good (as a Byzantine church) would make the other bad (as a Decorative Gothic church). The appearance of contradiction arises when we generalise from genre-bound judgments to unrestricted evaluative judgments, finding both of them good for apparently contradictory reasons. This may lead one to endorse an evaluative account we may call genre-relativism, permitting genre-relative evaluations, but holding that unrestricted evaluations are meaningless. However, we regularly indulge in such unrestricted evaluations, and there is in fact nothing wrong with them.[13] The point to bear in mind is that

[12] To simplify the presentation I will revert to referring only to simple instantiation of one kind in the examples, leaving out the complex relationships objects can have to kinds, as explained above.

[13] This does not mean of course that it is always possible to rank works belonging to different genres by their degree of excellence. Quite often such works are of incommensurate value. The points made in the text apply primarily to noncomparative but unrestricted judgments of value, though they signify that one necessary precondition of comparative judgments obtains.

unrestricted judgments are based on genre-related standards. The work is good because it is good by the standards of its genre.[14] While the verdict (good, bad, or mediocre) is unrestricted, its ground is always relative to a particular genre. Thus contradiction is avoided.

The same ways of resolving apparent contradictions apply outside the arts. One system of criminal justice is good to the extent that it is a good adversarial system; another is good to the extent that it is a good prosecutorial system. Excellence in being an adversarial system consists, in part, in features absence of which is among the conditions of excellence in being a prosecutorial system of justice. Nevertheless, the two systems may be no worse than each other, each being good through being a good instance of a different, and conflicting, kind.

Are not the examples I give simple cases of local relativism? Local relativities, of the "in Rome do as the Romans do" kind, are obviously important in facilitating the spirit of pluralism. Manifestations or applications of local relativism are usually taken to be, and some are, independent of genre- or kind-based considerations. They rely on nothing more than the fact that to apply to a particular set of circumstances, a relatively general value has to be realised in a way that will not be suitable for other circumstances.

We are used to appeal to such considerations to explain why different, incompatible forms of marriage, and of other social relations, were valuable at different times. We rarely test the hypothesis that this was made necessary by differing circumstances, and I suspect that often no such justification of diversity is available. The factual considerations involved are too complex to be known. True, in many such cases the local forms of relationships are suitable to local circumstances simply because they took root there, and people have become used to them, to living by them. This is a good reason for not disturbing them if they are valuable. But they are not valuable because they are the only way to implement some general value. Rather they are one of several possible valuable but incompatible arrangements to have. The argument for their value depends on a genre- or kind-based argument to defend their value against

[14] Among the many questions this view brings to mind: how is membership of genre determined? Criteria of membership in a genre are themselves genre determined and may differ from genre to genre. They are, in other words, determined by the sustaining practices of the genre. Since the standards of each genre determine membership in it, multiple membership is possible, and not all that rare. This may lead to diverse judgments, as the work may be good in one genre and not so good, or even bad, in another, leading to indeterminacy regarding its unrestricted standing.

charges of contradiction because of their incompatibility with other valuable arrangements.[15]

Many of the diversities in forms of personal relations, as well as the case of adversarial v. prosecutorial systems of criminal justice,[16] and many others, can be reconciled only via a local relativism that, to explain away apparent contradictions, relies on, and presupposes, genre- or kind-based evaluations.

## III. CHANGE AND UNDERSTANDING

### 1. Understanding and Value

To the extent that it is possible to distinguish them, my emphasis so far has been on ontological questions, on the existence of values. It is time to shift to questions of understanding of values, remembering all along that the two cannot be entirely separated.

Understanding, rather than knowledge, is the term that comes to mind when thinking of evaluative judgments. Judgment, rather than mere knowledge, is what the practically wise person possesses. Why? What is the difference? It is a matter of degree, with understanding and judgment involving typically, first, knowledge in depth, and secondly, and as a result, knowledge much of which is implicit. Understanding is knowledge in depth. It is connected knowledge in two respects. First, knowledge of what is understood is rich enough to place its object in its context, to relate it to its location and its neighbourhood, literally and metaphorically. Second, knowledge of what is understood is also connected to one's imagination, emotions, feelings, and intentions. What one understands one can imagine, empathise with, feel for, and be disposed to act appropriately regarding. Understanding tends to involve a

[15] I have discussed the application of this form of local relativism as applied to constitutions in J. Raz, "On the Authority and Interpretation of Constitutions: Some Preliminaries," in *Constitutionalism,* ed. Larry Alexander (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[16] Needless to say there can be shortcomings in each system that have to be remedied and that sometimes can be remedied by borrowing elements from another system, even one that is based on incompatible principles. But respect for valuable diversity is not to be confused with conservative opposition to sensible reform.

good deal of implicit knowledge precisely because it is connected knowledge. Its richness exceeds our powers of articulation.

Understanding is displayed, and put to use, through good judgment. To illustrate the point, think of a simple example of good judgment. Jane, we may say, is a good judge of wines. Ask her which wine to serve with the meal. John, by way of contrast, has perfect knowledge of the bus timetable. You should ask him which bus to take, but it would be odd to think of him as being a good judge of bus journeys, or as having a good judgment of bus journeys, in the way that Jane is clearly a good judge of wine because of her excellent judgment regarding wines. The difference is that John's views, perfect though they are, are based on one kind of consideration, whereas Jane is judging the bearing of a multitude of factors on the choice of wine. Moreover, the ways the different factors bear on each other, and on the ultimate choice, defy comprehensive articulation. If Jane is articulate and reflective (and to possess good judgment she need be neither) she may be able to explain every aspect of every one of her decisions, but she cannot describe exhaustively all aspects of her decisions, let alone provide a general detailed and contentfull[1] procedure for arriving at the choices or opinions she may reach on different real and hypothetical occasions, as John can.

It is not difficult to see why values call for understanding and judgment. The connection is most evident regarding specific values. They are mixed values, constituted by standards determining ways for ideal combinations of contributing values, and criteria for various relationships that objects can have to them (simple instantiation, inversion, etc.). Their knowledge requires knowledge of the various values that combine in their mix, and of the way their presence affects the value of the object given the presence of other values. Regarding these matters whose complexity and dense texture defy complete articulation, knowledge is connected and implicit, amounting, when it is reasonably reflective and reasonably complete, to understanding, and its use, in forming opinions and in taking decisions, calls for judgment.

The case of general values may be less clear. The more general the value, the more homogeneous and simple it is likely to be. Can one not have knowledge of it without understanding, and apply it without

[1] It is always possible to provide thin descriptions of such procedures: you consider the impact of all relevant factors on your overriding goal, and, mindful of the need to protect other matters of concern to you, you reach a decision that will be best in the circumstances. I do not mean formal or thin descriptions like this.

judgment? The apparent simplicity of general values is, however, misleading. To be sure, one can have limited knowledge of them, as one can of more specific values, without understanding. One can know that freedom is the value of being allowed to act as one sees fit. Such one-liners are true so far as they go. We find them useful because we have the background knowledge that enables us to read them correctly. Relying on abstract formulations of the content of values, and *denying* that they need to be understood in context and interpreted in light of other related values, leads to one of the most pernicious forms of fanaticism.

As I have already mentioned, more general values are explained at least in part by the way they feed into more specific ones. The point can be illustrated in various ways, appropriate to various examples. There could be forms of friendship different, some quite radically so, from those that exist today. But one cannot pursue friendship (a relatively general value) except through the specific forms it has (this comment will be somewhat qualified when we discuss innovation and change below). Therefore, knowledge of the value of friendship is incomplete without an understanding of its specific forms, with their specific forms of excellence.

## 2. Interpretation

I hope you found my remarks on the connectedness of knowledge about values, and its relation to understanding and judgment, persuasive. If so you may be wondering how much we can know about values.

The problem arises out of the fact that so much of our evaluative knowledge is implicit. This means that a considerable degree of disagreement is inevitable. Transmission of implicit knowledge depends on personal contacts. In mass mobile societies disagreements are liable to sprout. Disagreement about values undermines the very possibility of evaluative knowledge, at least so far as cultural values are concerned, and for the remaining time I will discuss only them.[2]

The nature of cultural values is determined in part by a standard of excellence, implicit knowledge of which is part of the conditions for possessing the value-concept. The concept and the value are thus inter-

[2] Much of what I will say applies, if at all, to other values as well, but the arguments that establish this will not be considered here.

dependent. The standard, you will remember, depends on a sustaining practice. The novel, for example, emerged as a distinct genre with its distinctive standard of excellence with the emergence of a sustaining practice. It could have been otherwise. A different value might have emerged had that practice not developed, and another one, sustaining a different standard, had emerged in its place. The process is continuous: the early Victorian novel developed into the mid-Victorian novel as the standard by which novels were judged changed with changes in the underlying sustaining practices, that is, with changes in the concepts involved, or, if you like, with the emergence of new concepts referring to the modified standards by which novels came to be judged.

Disagreements about the application of the concepts, those that cannot be explained by faulty information or other factors, mean that matter lies within the area regarding which the concept is vague. Here then is the problem: the value is determined by the standard of excellence set by the sustaining practice and enshrined in the value-concept. Where the value-concept is vague, because due to disagreements about it there is no common understanding of its application to some cases, what are we to think?

One temptation is to go down a radical subjectivist escape route and deny that evaluative disagreement is anything other than a difference of taste. There is no fact about which people disagree. They just like different things. Nothing in the story so far would, however, warrant this extreme reaction. The disagreement is limited, and does not warrant denying that we know that Leo Tolstoy is a better novelist than Elizabeth Gaskell, or that a fulfilling relationship can make all the difference to the quality of one's life, and many other evaluative truths. Furthermore, the nature of the disagreements we are considering tends to affirm rather than challenge the objectivity of values and the possibility of evaluative knowledge. For these disagreements are contained within a framework of shared views: that being imaginative contributes to the excellence of a novel, that being loyal contributes to the excellence of a relationship, and so on. The disagreement is about the way the elements relate, about their relative importance, and the like. It is bounded disagreement that makes sense only if the agreement makes sense, and the agreement is that regarding these boundary matters people are justified in their claim to knowledge. We need to find a way of dealing with the intractability of local disagreements without denying the possibility of evaluative knowledge in general.

What other options are there? The epistemic option[3] is not available. That option claims that the vagueness of evaluative concepts is due to people's ignorance of their precise nature, and hence their tendency to make mistakes in their application. In truth regarding each case there is, according to the epistemic option, a fact of the matter: either it is or it is not an instance of the value. In cases of vagueness we are, perhaps inescapably, unaware of it. Groping in the dark, we—not surprisingly—disagree. This option is not available because, given that the value-defining standard is set by the sustaining practice, if the sustaining practice is vague there is no fact of the matter ignorance of which renders our understanding of the value and the value-concept incomplete. There is nothing more to be known.[4]

You may think that there is no problem here. If those who disagree recognise that they are dealing with a vague case, and because of that the question whether the value-concept applies to the problem case admits of no clear answer, their disagreement will evaporate. They will both withdraw their conflicting claims and say that there is no answer to the question. But that option is not generally available either.[5]

First, the condition cannot always be met in cases of vagueness. That is, it cannot be the case that when a concept is vague those who have it always recognise when it is vague. If it were so the concept would not be vague. Rather it would be a concept that precisely applies to one range of objects, does not apply to a second range of objects, and the question of its application to a third range does not arise: regarding them it neither applies nor does not apply.

Regarding cultural values the problem is worse. The existence of a sustaining practice is a condition of their existence because the possibility of their instantiation requires that people understand something

[3] Associated with T. Williamson's (in his *Vagueness* [London: Routledge, 1994]) and R. Sorensen's account of vagueness generally, and with R. M. Dworkin's treatment of the vagueness of what he calls "interpretive concepts."

[4] In this regard the concepts of cultural values differ from the generality of concepts whose object does not depend on them, or on other closely related concepts, for its existence. Dedicated coherentists will say that the concept is determined by a coherent idealisation of the practice that resolves its vagueness. I agree that the concept cannot be gauged from a statistical headcount of people's behaviour. It is, if you like the phrase, a theoretical construct based on that behaviour. But it is not subject to a completeness requirement simply because there are not enough resources to prefer one way of completing it over the others. For my discussion of concepts, which depends on some aspects of T. Burge's account, see "Two Views of the Nature of the Theory of Law: A Partial Comparison," in *Hart's Postscript,* ed. Jules Coleman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[5] Though it is available in some cases.

about their nature, and that understanding will be implicit and requires a practice to be generated and transmitted. But the practice is not what explains why the standard of excellence is a standard of excellence. That is explained by reference to ordinary evaluative considerations. Therefore, where some people believe that the value-concept applies to an object and others deny that it does both sides appeal to evaluative considerations in justifying their views. Neither side appeals to the sustaining practice. The fact that it does not settle the issue cannot be invoked by either side. Therefore, the option of simply acknowledging that the case is a vague case and that none of the rival views is true is not always available to them.[6]

Moreover, retreat from a disputed domain is possible where there is something to retreat to. This is easy with concepts that admit of degree: he may not be quite bald, only balding, or something like that. But with cultural values that option is not usually available. The conflicting views, once fleshed out, are conflicting accounts of the standard of excellence for the kind.[7] While sometimes a relatively small retreat from each of the rival accounts can resolve the difference, allowing for an undetermined terrain, this is not always so. The rival accounts may cut across each other, leaving no room for such mutual retreat.

This makes this kind of evaluative disagreement resemble cases of aspect seeing or Gestalt shifts. Think of a duck/rabbit shape. I look at it and see a duck. I look again, and, usually with some effort, I switch and see a rabbit. I still know that it is a duck as well. Both perceptions are correct. Thinking about values does not rely on direct perception in this way. But disagreements due to the underdetermination of values, and the vagueness of value concepts, bear analogy to aspect seeing.[8] In them too one can, if one tries, appreciate the force behind the other person's account of the value. Yet that does not open the way to a partial modification of these accounts. Rather, typically one remains faithful to one's own account while acknowledging that the other's has force to it as well. Sometimes one does not. One can come to have both accounts and rely on each on different occasions.

[6] It is sometimes available, that is, when considerations other than appeal to the sustaining practices can be relied upon to establish the vagueness. This point will resurface below.

[7] Cf. R. M. Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

[8] On aspect seeing, see S. Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1990).

Can the holders of rival and incompatible views both be right? In spite of the initial implausibility, and the difficulties that this view creates, I believe that this is often the situation. We are not considering any disagreement about the value. In many disagreements at least one side is in the wrong. We are concerned only with disagreement where the sustaining practice underdetermines the issue. That is why it is tempting to say that there is no fact of the matter that can settle the dispute. Disagreements of this kind have two features: they are fairly general, and they cannot be explained away by ignorance or mistake.

Remember that the relations of concepts and of the values that depend on them and their sustaining practices are rather loose. Practices underdetermine the nature of the values they sustain when, owing to the relatively loose connection required, while they can rightly be claimed to support some particular standard of excellence, the claim that they support it is no better than the claim that they support another standard. When people's disagreements about the nature of a value are irresolvable they are so because they have, or can develop, ways of understanding the value that all conform with the commonly understood features of the value, what I called the boundaries of agreement, but diverge in their view of how they fit together, how they relate to each other, about their relative importance and whether they contribute to the value in dispute for one reason or another.

People unfamiliar with the value-concept would not be able to participate in the argument at all. Both diverging accounts have a good deal in common, and both present an attractive standard of excellence. Of course, one may like objects that excel by one standard better than objects that excel by the other standard. But that possibility is inherent in the approach to value I am developing. Values guide action, they guide our imagination and our taste; but there are many of them, and one's taste may favour some rather than others. Articulate people familiar with the value-concept can give a (partial) account of it, and I will assume that they are not making mistakes. Nevertheless, their account will inevitably be vague in some ways in which the concept is not, and not vague in some ways in which the concept is. It may be as good an account as one can give and yet there will be others no worse than it, but different, and incompatible in that they cannot all be part of one account.

This is why accounts of values deserve to be regarded as interpreta-

tions of the values they are accounts of. Interpretations are explanations (or displays) of meaning that can be rivalled. That is why we feel that they are more subjective: Alfred Brendel's interpretation of Schubert's B-flat sonata is no less good than, though very different from, that of Kovasovich, and it tells us something about Brendel as well as about the sonata. An explanation of how genes determine people's eye colour is not an interpretation, not because there can be only one such explanation, but because all the explanations are compatible with each other. They tell us little about those who give them other than their ability to explain.

Explanations are interpretations where there is a possibility of diverse incompatible explanations being correct. This multiplicity of correct rival interpretations explains why they are so revealing of their authors.[9] But it does not show, as some suppose, that interpretations are no more than a matter of taste. Some interpretations are straightforwardly wrong; others though holding some truth are inferior to their rivals. In short, the concept of interpretation provides us with the features we wanted: it is governed by objective standards, yet it allows that the phenomena underdetermine their interpretation and can be interpreted in various ways, none worse than the others. This allows them to be revealing of the interpreters, as well as of those who prefer one interpretation to the others.

Like aspect-seeing, interpretations admit both of fixity and of flexibility. That is, it takes an effort for people to see the sense of rival interpretations, and the common belief that if I am right the other must be wrong is no help in this. Even after one sees the merit of a rival interpretation there may be only one that one feels at home with. Yet some people can be at home with various ones and feel free to rely on them on different occasions.

We display this complexity by regarding some interpretive statements as true or false, others as right or wrong, and others still as more or less correct, or as good interpretations, an appellation that allows for the possibility of others no less good. We need to free ourselves from the rigidity of the divisions of domains of thought into those that are either objective and entirely governed by true/false dichotomy and those that are entirely subjective and are mere matters of taste. There are many

[9] Though, of course, mistakes and wrong interpretations can also be revealing of their authors.

other reasons for breaking out of this straightjacket. But unless we do so we will not be able to understand our understanding of values.

## 3. Interpretation and Change

One way of putting my response to doubts about evaluative knowledge that derive from the perennial nature of some kinds of evaluative disagreement is that we can know more than those who deny the possibility of evaluative knowledge suppose, and less than many of their opponents think, or that we can know something, but less than is sometimes imagined. My tendency to explain the possibility of knowledge at the expense of many knowledge claims was evident in my account of the kind- or genre-based nature of many evaluative judgments. Since many value judgments are genre-based, they allow for knowledge, based on the defining standards of the genre, and avoid contradiction, since different objects that belong to different kinds can be judged by otherwise contradictory standards.

The underdetermination of value by practice, which is an inevitable consequence of the social dependence of value, confronted us with a different problem. However, my response was similar. I claimed that both sides in such disputes can be right. This time recognition of this fact requires not realisation that criteria of value are kind-based, but a loosening of the rigid divide between matters of knowledge and matters of taste, between the domain of truth and that of preference. The realisation both of the kind-dependence of value judgments and of the interpretive nature of many value judgments requires greater toleration of diversity than is common. It requires abandoning many claims to exclusive truth. But those are also required of us if we are not to make claims that the subject does not warrant.

The tendency to account for evaluative knowledge through moderating its ambition is common to important strands in contemporary philosophy.[10] My motivation differs from that of most of these writers in that I am not concerned with reconciling evaluative knowledge with a naturalistic metaphysics, nor with the alleged problem of how evalua-

[10] See, in very different ways, Alan Gibbard, Peter Railton, and Christine Korsgaard among others.

tive beliefs can motivate.[11] This may account for some of the differences in the positions we favour.

The softening of the distinctions between knowledge and taste, truth and preference, which I am urging, arises out of the social dependence of value, with the result that, at least where cultural values are concerned, the proper contours of values are vague and their existence is in a flux. This results in the centrality of interpretation in evaluative thinking. Interpretation also provides the bridge between understanding of what there is and creation of the new. The crucial point is to see how this transition can be gradual, almost unnoticed. Of course it is not always like that. We are familiar with pioneering, revolutionary social movements as well as with self-consciously revolutionary movements or individual attempts in the arts. The social dependence of values points to caution in understanding the contribution of such revolutionary innovations. History is replete with examples of revolutionary impulses leading people to abandon, as out of fashion or worse, the pursuit of familiar values, in search of some vision of the new and better. It is much rarer for those visions to come true as intended. The new forms of the good take time and require the density of repeated actions and interactions to crystallise and take a definite shape, one that is specific enough to allow people intentionally to realise it in their life or in or through their actions. When they settle, they commonly turn out to be quite a bit different from the revolutionary vision that inspired them.

Be that as it may, it is of interest to see how the familiar fact that change can be imperceptible is explained by the facts adumbrated so far. Two processes are available, and the distinction between them is often too vague to allow a clear diagnosis when one or the other occurs. First, one may like a variant on the norm, and that may catch on, and become the standard for a new norm. Second, one or another of the interpretations of a value, even if it is no better than its rivals because the value is underdetermined, may gain wide acceptance and affect the practice, shifting it to a new standard. In this case the change is relatively conservative, typical of the way kinds drift over time, imperceptibly, or at least unperceived at the moment. What has been undetermined by the old kind becomes the clear standard of the new kind.

[11] My response to the first issue is outlined above in Lecture I, section 2, and to the issue of motivation in chapter 5 of *Engaging Reason.*

The important point to make is that the social dependence of values enables us to understand better such developments and their general availability. It enables us to reconcile the objectivity of values with their fluidity and sensitivity to social practices, to shared understanding and shared meanings. It enables us to combine holding to a fixed point of reference, which is essential to thinking of values as objective and to our being able to orient ourselves by them, either by trying to realise them or through more complex relations to them, and realising that their fixity is temporary and fragile, which explains how change is often continuous, and no different from their further development in one way rather than another, which was equally open. None of this is explainable unless we take seriously the contingency at the heart of value.