

Can Our Values Be Objective? On Ethics, Aesthetics, and Progressive Politics*

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ARE EVALUATIONS ALWAYS POLITICAL? Are our efforts to make objective value judgments always thwarted by our own political interests or our cultural and social perspectives? I am interested in this question because I am interested in progressive politics and would like to believe that my values and commitments are not rigidly determined by my social background or my narrow personal interests. In this paper I would like to defend the view that objectivity is attainable in the realm of values, in such areas as ethics and even aesthetics. For the purposes of the present discussion, I shall pose the question about value in epistemological terms: Can we human beings be objective in our views and judgments about such properties as goodness, justice, or beauty?

In order to outline my position and present my argument, however, I need to first explain what I mean by objectivity, for it is clear that we live in a postempiricist intellectual world where the term has undergone substantial redefinition. Whether we work in literary studies or in philosophy, in anthropology or any of the social sciences, we have to acknowledge the deep critique of empiricist and positivist epistemologies which has emerged from related developments in the philosophies of science and language, in ethics and cultural studies. Specifically, what has been shown to be inadequate is a particular conception of observation and objective knowledge. Thus, philosophers like Quine and Putnam, Nietzsche or Heidegger, all argue that everything that science relies on—its methodology, its understanding of what “facts” are, its practices of confirmation and even observation—is always necessarily theory-dependent rather than innocent, filtered through our values, presuppositions, and ideologies, rather than unmediated and self-evident.

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Where contemporary philosophers and most literary theorists disagree, however, is in their account of the implications of this antipositivist insight about the unavailability of theory. A natural question to ask the antipositivist is this: Does the necessary ubiquity of theories and presuppositions, of biases and ideologies, lead to the conclusion that “objectivity” as such is never possible, not in values and not even in science? That conclusion, that objectivity is never possible, is endorsed by postmodernist thinkers who are influential especially in the fields of literary and cultural studies. A very different conclusion, endorsed by postpositivist thinkers in a variety of fields from philosophy of science to some new forms of literary theory, is that what is outmoded is specifically the positivist conception of objectivity, a conception based on a denial of the role of theory. This positivist view defines objective knowledge as something we achieve when we have freed ourselves from all bias and all interest; in this conception objectivity is seen as absolute *neutrality*, a complete divestiture of the thinker’s subjectivity and her socially situated values, ideologies, and theoretical presuppositions. Defenders of a postpositivist conception of objectivity claim that this image of complete divestiture is profoundly flawed because such divestiture is never possible for humans. Objectivity is not neutrality. What we need to develop, such thinkers insist, is a more nuanced conception of objectivity which goes beyond the specifically positivist view of it; it is argued that this new conception can be built on an analysis of the differences between different kinds of subjective or theoretical bias or interest, an analysis that distinguishes those biases that are limiting or counterproductive from those that are in fact necessary for knowledge, that are epistemically productive and useful.

Arguing against postmodernist literary and cultural critics, I said in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* that such an analysis of different kinds of bias and prejudice needs to focus on the role error plays in human inquiry.¹ Our elaboration of a new, nuanced conception of objectivity in literary and cultural inquiry, I suggested, depends on the richness of our understanding of error—its sources and causes, as well as the variety of forms it takes in various contexts. Our conceptions of objectivity and error are dialectically related. Both conceptions are the product of good inquiry, inquiry that is necessarily both theoretical and empirical. The analysis of error—of the distorting role played by pernicious social ideologies for instance, or the limitations of certain methodological approaches—is unavoidably empirical, even while it involves theoretical considerations. Similarly, the analysis of what works, what is epistemically productive and useful, is also simultaneously empirical and theoretical.² The view I am defending is opposed to the postmodernist position that objectivity as such is impossible, for I believe

that objectivity is often a realizable goal. Indeed, as I suggest later, objectivity is an epistemic ideal in the realm of values precisely because *values often refer to facts and properties that exist independently of our beliefs*. Such moral and aesthetic properties as goodness, justice, and beauty are, on this view, complex properties of objects and persons in the world, and we can be right or wrong in our attempts to detect and understand such properties. For realists (about value), the identification and analysis of error is essential for the attainment of objective knowledge.

One of my claims in this paper is that when postmodernists assume a skeptical attitude toward objectivity in an *a priori* way, their analysis of error often ends up being very limited in some ways and very inflated in others. An *a priori* skepticism makes it less urgent for us to look carefully at the variety of forms of, say, ideological error, and at the reasons for the differences among these different forms. The incomplete or inadequate empirical analysis is both supported by and seen as the support for an inflated thesis about the unavailability of error. Error and distortion thus become a primeval epistemic condition, an original sinfulness, as it were. Instead of an explanation of error, we end up with a theology that sets unnecessarily rigid limits on the scope of social inquiry.

Foucault vs. Chomsky: Are Values Political?

The postmodernist view of error is often presented initially as an empirical caution, but the skepticism that it is supposed to lead to is deep and unwavering, ultimately amounting to an acontextual and unqualified position. What begins as an empirically grounded caution is often elevated to a rigid theoretical doctrine.³ And nowhere is this move from methodological caution to inflexible theory as clearly evident as in the postmodernist suspicion of normativity, of values. This suspicion leads some thinkers—particularly progressive thinkers—into strange quandaries, or at least into obvious inconsistencies. Michel Foucault, for instance, in his 1971 debate with Noam Chomsky, initially raises the empirically based question about whether political activists and thinkers should rely on a substantive conception of human nature, deriving justification for their values and goals from such a conception. His initial point is a familiar one, and it is fundamentally sound: “If you say that a certain human nature exists, that this human nature has not been given in actual society the rights and the possibilities which allow it to realise itself . . . [don’t you] risk defining this human nature—which is at the same time ideal and real . . .—in terms borrowed from our society, from our civilization, from our culture?”⁴ The “risk” Foucault is talking about can be best understood in the context of the antipositivist theoretical

insight I identified earlier. All knowledge is unavoidably socially situated, and it is impossible to seek the kind of objectivity that is understood as neutrality, as ideological or theoretical innocence. When we try to define human nature, we inevitably do so “in terms borrowed from our society, from our civilization, from our culture.” The legitimate question, then, is: Since our account of human nature is inevitably shaped by our society and culture, the context in which the account originates, how can we minimize the risk of repeating our culture’s ideological errors, projecting our metaphysical blindnesses onto the ideal human nature we wish to imagine and theorize? Foucault’s initial point is also a more specifically historical one: we risk error in talking about human nature, he says, because we know of so many instances in the past when we have erred, and erred seriously and egregiously. Socialists of a certain period, he points out, unwittingly used a bourgeois model of human nature even when they claimed to be going beyond such a model and its ideological implications: “The socialism of . . . the end of the nineteenth century, and the beginning of the twentieth century, admitted in effect that in capitalist societies man hadn’t realised the full potential of his development and self-realisation. . . . And [this socialism] dreamed of an ultimately liberated human nature. . . . What model did it use to conceive, project, and eventually realise human nature? It was in fact the bourgeois model. The universalization of the model of the bourgeois has been the utopia which has animated the constitution of Soviet society.” All of this indicates, he concludes, “that it is difficult to say exactly what human nature is” and that “there is a risk that we will be led into error” (174).

Now, it is necessary to be careful here if we want to understand where exactly the disagreement lies. For few people on the other side of this debate (Chomsky, to take an obvious instance) will dream of denying that it is “difficult to say exactly what human nature is” if by that we mean that it is difficult to come up with a comprehensive account of human nature. But that is not Foucault’s main point. His point about the “risk” (that “we will be led into error”) cuts deeper. His antipositivist theoretical insight and his empirical caution about the historical errors in our use of the idea of human nature together lead Foucault to entertain an extreme claim: human nature as such may not exist, for what we have is entirely culture- or class-specific. He cites Mao approvingly, suggesting that there may only be a “bourgeois human nature and [a] proletarian human nature and [Mao thinks] that they are not the same thing” (174). This is a radically relativist (and historicist) position, but notice that it does not follow in a straightforward way from the earlier thesis about the erroneous and unwittingly ideological uses of the concept of human nature. From empirically grounded cautions about error, we

have been led to at least two possible theses: (1) there is no such thing as human nature; and/or (2) our knowledge of human nature, even if there were such a thing, would never be reliable or objective, since everything we can say about human nature will be ideological. Now the two theses I have identified are distinct, and they call for different kinds of argument and evidence for support, but Foucault's general attitude suggests that he is drawn to (at least) the skeptical view (2), which denies the possibility of objective knowledge altogether. Bourgeois or proletarian, we are stuck with our own class-based views about human nature, and there is no going beyond such limited ideological views. The socialist thinkers cited earlier, Foucault would say, proved how dead wrong one can be in trying to go beyond one's culture-specific and class-specific notions and images of human nature. Their error, in other words, is symptomatic of the human condition; there is no hope of transcending such an ideology.

I believe that Foucault's attitude toward human nature cannot be adequately understood unless we see that it is accompanied by a tenacious suspicion of all normative claims as such. In fact, this suspicion strengthens the view that no objective account of human nature is possible. The problem with human nature might be that it is, as he says, simultaneously "ideal and real," and hence our thinking about it is especially vulnerable to speculative fancies. The suspicion of normative claims becomes clearer later in the discussion. Arguing for the need for the victory of the proletariat in its class struggle against the bourgeoisie, Foucault nonetheless balks at the idea that this need ought to be justified by appealing to a normative conception such as social justice. He is quite emphatic about this: "The proletariat does not wage war against the ruling class because it considers such a war to be just. The proletariat makes war . . . because for the first time in history it wants to take power. And *because* it will overthrow the power of the ruling class it considers such a war to be just. . . . One makes war to win, not because it is just" (182, emphasis added). For Foucault, this is not a psychological description (of the way the proletariat thinks); rather, it is an account of what "justifies" proletarian class struggle, which Foucault supports. The justification, he says, is not justice, since it does not exist except as tied inextricably to power (180; *see below*). It is power, the newly acquired power of the proletariat after its victory, that will justify its struggle. There is thus bourgeois justice and proletarian justice, with no objective conception of justice that can transcend either.

It is on this point about whether value judgments can be objectively justified that Chomsky, for the sake of clarification, presses Foucault. If Foucault could be convinced, Chomsky suggests for the sake of argument, that the victory of the proletariat will lead to terror and the permanent

abuse of power and never to a better society, he would probably not support the proletariat; his support of the working people in a class war must depend on a conviction—or a vision—of something better than what exists. Foucault admits, finally, that class struggle is more than a simple logic of fighting to win: “What the proletariat will achieve by expelling the class which is at present in power and by taking over power itself, is precisely the suppression of the power of class in general” (184). “The suppression of the power of class in general”—here, clearly, is a basic conception of a more just order, where the premises are that class power (particularly in its current form) is wrong and it is only the proletariat that can use its power to get rid of class power. Here, surely, is a conception of justice, no matter how elementary a sketch it might be. But, interestingly, Foucault denies that his justification is in terms of “justice” or any other normative notion. The theoretical argument he advances is radically skeptical and relativist: “Contrary to what you think, you can’t prevent me from believing that these notions of human nature, of justice, of the realisation of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilisation, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system; and one can’t, however regrettable it may be, put forward these notions to justify a fight which should—and shall in principle—overthrow the very fundamentals of our society. This is an extrapolation for which I can’t find the . . . historical justification” (187).

Here is what Foucault means by the “extrapolation” for which he can find no “historical justification”: a culture’s deepest evaluative concepts, like human welfare and social justice, are formed within the ideological, philosophical, and political boundaries of that culture, and people like Chomsky wish to use these concepts to justify an objective ideal, one that by definition goes beyond the bounds of this culture. How, Foucault asks, can one justify a political ideal with terms and concepts borrowed from a world that is far from ideal? How can you adequately imagine a healthy body while using the diseased and faulty organs of perception and imagination that we in fact have? I think this is a good question, and an important one, but notice that formulated in this way it is linked to the antipositivist point about the theory-dependence of observation and knowledge which I discussed earlier. Foucault’s question is the same one philosophers of science, for instance, have been raising for several decades now: given that scientific methods are so radically theory-dependent, how can we use them to gain objective knowledge, knowledge that can transcend the limitations of the given theory? Different answers to this question are provided by different philosophers and historians of science, but the one point that is relevant to our discussion

of the status of value is that a lot depends on precisely how we define objectivity. As may already be evident, Foucault does in fact have a conception of objective values here; it is simply that his conception of objectivity is so extreme and ahistorical that it is impossible to attain. While seeming to argue in a general way for an antipositivist view of objective knowledge, Foucault in fact *assumes* an essentially positivist conception of objectivity as absolute (ideological, theoretical, and historical) neutrality! And since this extreme and abstract notion of objectivity is impossible to attain, he ends up espousing a rigidly skeptical view about values. Let me explain how this happens.

Foucault's thesis is not that our ideas about justice and human nature are inevitably somewhat tainted by our current social ideologies and our other views about, say, morality, society, and even the nature of the universe. None of Foucault's opponents in this debate, to the extent they accept the antipositivist view we've discussed, would deny this basic claim about the social situatedness of knowledge. Foucault's real claim—the one that differentiates his position from that of someone like Chomsky—is that we cannot even distinguish between the *current* conception of justice and a *better* one. He argues against Chomsky's use of the idea of a better justice: "So it is in the name of a purer justice that you criticise the functioning of justice? There is an important question for us here. It is true that in all social struggles, there is a question of 'justice'. . . . But if justice is at stake in a struggle, then it is as an instrument of power; it is not in the hope that finally one day, in this or another society, people will be rewarded according to their merits, or punished according to their faults" (180). The thesis is this: since the notion of justice is at stake in (that is, is deployed in and hence redefined by) social struggles—a perfectly plausible empirical claim about just about every society we know—justice is *no more than* an instrument of power.

Since power corrupts our concepts and our methods of inquiry, Foucault asks, how can we use such concepts and methods to imagine a world that transcends our political framework? His own implicit answer, that we cannot legitimately justify our normative ideals, is supported by the following further specification: We cannot in principle talk about better conceptions of justice, since for such a conception to be truly better, it must not make *any* reference to any of the "fundaments of our society" (187), the society that has shaped such a conception. The underlying view is that the only conception of justice that can really—objectively—be better than what we've got is one that is entirely new, entirely free of our current social biases and ideologies, all our current knowledge—the fundaments of our society. Short of this kind of untainted and pristine conception of justice—divested of everything

that can legitimately called cultural or social—every conception becomes ideological, in the narrowly pejorative sense of the word. Objective knowledge of justice is imaginable, according to this line of argument, but only as a form of absolute theoretical and ideological neutrality. We do not know what “justice” can refer to, and it is best (on this theoretical view) to define objectivity as a purely epistemic stance—one defined by a complete shedding of all our social and political “biases,” all our theoretical commitments. But of course this is the very conception of objectivity, the severely asocial and ahistorical positivist view, which we were supposed to reject!⁵

This is a limiting and unproductive conception of objectivity, but why is Foucault (unwittingly) drawn to it? I suggest that it is because he subscribes to an implausible form of epistemological holism, an unnecessarily extreme version of the legitimate antipositivist thesis about the theory-dependence of all observation and knowledge. Foucault’s implausible epistemological holism is not in principle limited to values, since it can have relevance for all of human knowledge, but his arguments here focus on evaluative concepts since (as we saw above) they are simultaneously “ideal and real.” His initial claim is that “justice,” as an evaluative notion, is tied to various other features of our social world, those features that make our world what it in fact is. In arguing against the objectivity of evaluative notions like justice, Foucault is not drawing on the familiar observation that since, when we look cross-culturally, we see a variety of conceptions of justice, our own conception must be limited and culture-specific. For this familiar observation naturally elicits the objection that the presence of variety does not preclude the possibility that one of the existing conceptions is in fact better, more accurate than the others. Recognition of variety is useful, it might be argued, to show how some cultural contexts might in fact have enabled greater accuracy and objectivity in thinking about the nature of the just society, while others have served to distort our thinking about these matters. The mere existence of cultural variety in approaches to justice does nothing, it can be objected, to establish the general skeptical or relativist thesis, the thesis that notions of justice are entirely culture- or class-specific. But Foucault’s argument is not vulnerable to this objection, for at bottom he is proposing an epistemology of value. Values are always partly speculative, the claim goes, and we can never justify them since they are especially prone to social distortion. Indeed, this distortion is of a kind that undermines *any* possibility of justification. You cannot expect to eliminate distortions produced by particular relations of power, say the class system, Foucault would say, because these relations are *inextricably* dependent on various other things that make our society or culture what it is. It is this claim about *inextricability*

that makes Foucault's position untenable, for it suggests that error and distortion cannot be eliminated, and our critical analyses of social phenomena will always be radically compromised by the ideologies of our class or, more generally, our society. For Foucault, notions like justice are formed within overlapping structures of discourse and political power: they "have been formed within our civilisation, within our type of knowledge, and our form of philosophy, and as a result form part of our class system." The type of knowledge and form of philosophy are causally related to the class system, but this relationship is so radically determined—or perhaps just so irreducibly complex—that it undermines any attempt to analyze the distortion produced by any one of them. That explains why (according to Foucault) even the search for slightly better, slightly less distorted, views of human nature or social and political justice is impossible.⁶ It is this crucial thesis about the analytical inextricability of power and truth, the reduction of all analysis to ideology, that makes Foucault's epistemological holism extreme and implausible, and it is on this kind of holism that the myth of an otherworldly, asocial (and always necessarily impossible) objectivity is based.

Chomsky, on the other hand, argues that we need better values, that often our social struggles are best served not only by carefully articulated critiques of what exists, but also by carefully elaborated visions of how the social arrangements we are criticizing could be different and better, more humane and just. His defense of the need for "better" concepts of justice is based on the view that our most valuable notions of justice are firmly grounded in a plausible (though necessarily partial) view of human nature. "Our concept of human nature is certainly limited; it's partially socially conditioned, constrained by our own character defects and the limitations of the intellectual culture in which we exist. Yet at the same time it is of critical importance that we know what impossible goals we're trying to achieve, if we hope to achieve some of the possible ones. And that means that we have to be bold enough to speculate and create social theories on the basis of partial knowledge, while remaining very open to the strong possibility, and in fact overwhelming probability, that at least in some respects we're very far off the mark" (175). Here is a view of how partly speculative notions like human nature are not only necessary but also legitimate; it outlines an epistemological approach I take for granted in the second section of this paper, where I propose an alternative to the Foucauldian (and, more generally, the postmodernist) account of values. Foucault is deeply suspicious of all evaluative concepts because, as he claims, power and knowledge are so deeply intertwined that we cannot "extrapolate" from our current ideologically tainted concepts to less ideological, more "objective" ones. This claim about the

relationship of power and knowledge, as I have shown, is based on an extreme form of epistemological holism, which is an implausible version of the legitimate postpositivist thesis about the theory-dependence of all knowledge. It is this kind of implausible holism which sanctions Foucault's own view of objectivity as a kind of (absolute) epistemic neutrality, a view that mirrors the widely criticized positivist conception of objectivity. The net effect of these theses is that Foucault's skepticism about values (and perhaps all knowledge) becomes an *a priori* matter; notwithstanding the numerous statements about current ideologies and political arrangements, the skepticism itself is entirely independent of any empirical understanding of actually existing societies. Even though Foucault claims that he cannot find historical justification for the hope that we will be able to come up with better values and visions than what exist, his own skepticism about values is itself free of empirical support or justification. And there does not seem to be much room left open for seeking such support for it. Once we adopt this extreme thesis about values, that better values, genuinely better ones, must make no reference at all to the fundamentals of our society, culture, and civilization, the skeptical position follows automatically. And the skepticism is insulated from any real empirical testing and elaboration. For there can be no genuine empirical elaboration of a claim without the possibility that the claim might itself be proved wrong. When we acknowledge such a possibility, this overly inflexible skeptical stance, this suspicion of normative theory as such, becomes untenable. In the realm of social analysis, such *a priori* skepticism becomes dogmatic or doctrinaire, since it leaves open no room for its own empirical or theoretical errors. Oddly enough (or, some would say, naturally enough), such a doctrinaire approach bases itself on claims about the ubiquity of ideological error and the need for a rigorous analysis of socially based distortions.

It must be evident by now that even though Foucault has been talking about political and ethical values—namely justice—the argument I have identified would extend his skeptical stance to the area of aesthetic values as well. In fact, it is easier to see why one should be a skeptic about aesthetic values. The deeper argument against the possibility that some aesthetic values can be objective is not the empirical fact that there is a great deal of cross-cultural difference, variety, and indeed disagreement over aesthetic judgments (the purely empirical argument we often get from some multiculturalists) but rather the very one about the ubiquity of theory that I identified earlier. The deeper argument will see aesthetic value as socially situated and hence culturally subjective for the very same reasons that all values (especially ethical and political ones) are

subjective; it identifies a problem with values *as such*, and how we justify them. The deeper justification for skepticism about aesthetic values must derive from a version of epistemological holism in which all value judgments are never more than contextual and culture-specific by definition. Just as ethical and political notions like justice are inextricably tied to what Foucault calls the “fundaments of our society” (any society), so—it must be argued—are aesthetic notions, which are deeply entwined with the society’s cultural and ethical notions.

The literary theorist Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who has written widely cited essays and books on value, has argued that we should define values as no more than “positive effects.”⁷ Here is how she supports this idea: “In recognizing the tacit assumptions built into value judgments, we can also recognize that, when we frame an explicit verbal evaluation of a text, we are usually not expressing only how we feel about it ‘personally’ but, rather, observing its effects on ourselves and estimating its value for other people: not all other people, however, but a limited set of people with certain relevant characteristics—usually, though not necessarily, characteristics that they share with us” (183). This is the same kind of claim as the one Foucault makes, but instead of referring to the entire civilization or culture as Foucault does, Smith refers to smaller social groups (“sets”) within a culture. The underlying claim is, however, the same: the possibility of objective value judgments is ruled out in advance because values refer primarily (and perhaps even essentially) to social context. “[W]ith respect to values,” Smith claims, “everything is always in motion with respect to everything else. If there *are* constancies of literary value, they will be found *in those very motions*: that is, in the relations among the variables. For, like all value, literary value is not the property of an object *or* of a subject but, rather, *the product of the dynamics of a system*.”⁸ The “system” is defined in social and historical terms, for while Smith does indeed admit to some “species-wide” features of human nature, such features are defined in highly restrictive behaviorist language. They do not point (*at all*) to deeper human needs and capacities, for instance, but instead only to “mechanisms of perception and cognition . . . as they relate to . . . verbal behavior.” Such “presumably biophysiological mechanisms,” Smith clarifies, “will always operate differentially in different environments . . . and, therefore, the experience of literary and aesthetic value cannot be altogether accounted for, reduced to, or predicted by them” (15). Culture and social context determine value more than do any deep features of human nature, and thus values are no more than positive *effects*. The possibility that is ruled out in advance is that the different ways in which different

social groups make value judgments may also be evaluated from a perspective that is not limited to any of these groups.

Such evaluation would partly depend, as I have been suggesting, on an analysis of different kinds of socially based error, and of the different sources and causes of these errors. Once we engage in such an analysis we have to keep open the possibility that in some instances some kinds of error can be eradicated through appropriate adjustments in our methodologies, our background assumptions and theories, or the cultural information we take for granted. Empirical inquiry becomes essential if we are to understand not only particular kinds of error but also what values are; it is the only genuine way to substantiate and test the skeptical claim Smith (and Foucault before her) wants to make about the epistemology of value. Such empirically grounded theoretical inquiry would help us see whether Smith's desire to narrowly circumscribe values as merely "positive effects" is justified or whether it tethers us to an implausible behaviorist view. An equally essential part of my theoretical proposal in the next section is a thesis about the links between value and human nature; like Chomsky, I would like to argue that values are not *only* socially determined, because often they also refer to deeper features of human nature, our species-wide needs and capacities, which set limits on how historically "contingent" legitimate evaluations can be. Our evaluations can be objective, I suggest, because they are often about features of human nature that are independent of our own socially shaped judgments and attitudes. Despite their enormous social variability, our evaluations can thus be more than merely positive effects, and more than unacknowledged political interests. One of the key challenges for any theory of value, then, is to account for *both* the social and historical variability of values *and* (simultaneously) the possibility of objectivity.

How Values Can Be Objective

I would like to outline a proposal about how to define value so that we avoid the pitfalls of the skeptical position, and in particular its *a priori* approach to the epistemic status of values. I propose that many of our deepest evaluative concepts, whether ethical ones or aesthetic, refer not only to the cultures and social contexts in which they were produced but also, as it were, "outward": they refer both to genuine properties of human nature and to what we know about our social and political possibilities. Such evaluative notions will naturally reflect the underlying biases and ideologies, the theoretical prejudices and empirical limitations, of our own cultural views. But they also reflect—either badly or

well, reflecting degrees of error and distortion but also accuracy and objectivity—what we currently know about humankind and its possibilities. When I talk about “reference” here, I mean a process and a relation that are dynamic rather than static: our deeper evaluative notions are linked not to unique and singular objects in the world but instead to complex objects and the way we gain epistemic access to them. On this view of reference, then, as a culture acquires more accurate knowledge of, say, human potentials and capacities, its central evaluative notions and concepts will become richer. Such knowledge depends on a number of factors, from everyday practical experiments with, say, child-rearing or forms of education to more self-consciously reflexive and methodologically systematic kinds of research conducted within institutions. There is room here for both objective knowledge and error, since our deepest evaluations—regarding such things as social justice, for instance—refer not only to what we, in a given culture, know *now*, but also, necessarily, to what we may come to know later about the object of inquiry. Our values are thus “open-textured” in nature, open in the same way that any knowledge-gathering process is. Since they depend on what we know (or can imagine realistically) now, our values are historically and socially embedded. In referring outward to the object of an ongoing inquiry, they remain partial and incomplete theses or theories about something objective and transculturally valid.⁹

I submit that this way of defining value is better than the purely skeptical or relativist approaches I have identified. On this general view, the question of objectivity is raised in the context of our empirical and theoretical analyses of error. Such error arises more from cultural than from purely individual biases, for in linking values to our knowledge of our social and political possibilities, I have indicated why values are not simply inside an individual’s head, reflecting merely idiosyncratic and purely subjective beliefs. They are social, even when they are refracted through an individual’s beliefs and personal needs. But they should not be seen as purely internal to a given society, culture, or civilization either. At bottom, my epistemological defense of values is based on the specifically realist claim that some of our deepest evaluations refer to (properties of) objects that exist *independently* of our local social and cultural beliefs. In this context, then, “objectivity” should be understood as more than an epistemic stance or attitude (such as, say, neutrality), because *in these crucial cases* our evaluations can be right or wrong about these objects. Human nature is such an *object* about which we (entire cultures or societies) can be right or wrong. Unlike Foucault, I argue that (some of) our values track real “objects” of inquiry. It is possible to be objective in our evaluations because our deepest evaluations are often about complex objects in the world, objects which we are

attempting to understand and know and which cannot be reduced to our ideological constructions.

Thus, our evaluations are necessarily shaped by answers to questions that might be asked in local cultural conditions but that are not thereby limited to the local. Here is a set of closely entwined questions that suggest how values are dependent on ongoing empirical and theoretical research and how they refer outward beyond a local culture or society; an interesting feature of the questions, you will notice, is that it is difficult to neatly separate the ethical from the aesthetic, the political from the scientific: How much fruitful cooperation and interchange are humans capable of? Are altruism and the capacity for sympathy for others fully realized in the societies with which we are familiar, or are there social forms and arrangements that might enhance, even beyond our wildest imagination, these traits and capacities? To what extent are human cognitive powers dependent on the affective dimension of our lives, and how does affective growth expand even our theoretical imagination? And finally, is the imagination one underlying cognitive faculty, with deep connections and interdependencies among its various activities—in the realms of, say, science, ethics, and aesthetics—or would it be legitimate to talk about various faculties, various kinds of imagination—moral, aesthetic, and so on? Answers to such questions cannot be purely speculative but will need to be empirically grounded as well, and so such answers will entail the possibility of our being wrong at times and right at times, of both error and distortion on the one hand and of knowledge on the other (or at least of a better account, a less distorted one). It also seems clear that our accounts of both what we consider error and what we consider objective knowledge will themselves involve both empirical and theoretical considerations. Judgments about error or knowledge will, quite typically, arise out of complex negotiations among competing theories and even bodies of theory, including normative theory. In this way, even such basic judgments will be socially embedded, tied to ideologies and the social practices of our own cultures. But notice, once again, that on the realist view I am advocating here, the pursuit of such questions (at least in these crucial cases) has to be shaped by “objects” that are not purely cultural or ideological. The thesis here (going back to contrast the claim with what Foucault says) is that even though there is a bourgeois conception of human nature and a proletarian conception of human nature, there is a human nature that may well not be accurately and adequately depicted by either conception, and it is this that is *also* the subject of inquiry. The implication of this thesis is that even though, say, the bourgeois view of the human capacity for cooperation will be limited and shaped by the ideology and experience of the bourgeoisie, to ask questions about such a capacity for

cooperation is to inquire, in a way that transcends any particular ideology, about a property that is shared by all humans, both members of the bourgeois class and the proletariat. So it would be unnecessarily limiting to consider the questions themselves to be purely ideological, open only to intracultural descriptive analysis.

Let me develop my claim that many of our deepest evaluative notions—moral and political, as well as aesthetic—refer to relevant features of human nature and to genuine social and historical possibilities that are available to us. I distinguish these deep notions (social equality, say) from more superficial and variable ones, even though the latter pervade our daily lives and make up the stuff of our everyday existence. My preference that the walls of my study be a certain color is quite possibly of much consequence to me, but there is no need to see such a preference as any more than an individual's taste or a culturally determined value. My marginal preference that all my friends have an environmental consciousness may seem a bit more significant, but even in these kinds of choices or evaluations a great deal of human variety is possible and perhaps even desirable. Things are not entirely different with our partiality toward certain kinds of novels or toward certain choices in lifestyle. These choices and evaluations may not be purely arbitrary and capricious, and one may allow that there can be considerable intersubjective agreement about which of these evaluations are objectively justified (after sustained reflection, extensive experience, and relevant comparison among various genres and types of novels or of various lifestyles). But it is unlikely that such intersubjective agreement reveals anything essential about humans as such, about the way we happen to be constituted, our species-specific traits and capacities.

Many of our deepest evaluative notions, I am claiming, do indeed point to such traits and capacities. Take equality, for instance. It is clearly a normative notion, and it is used in a variety of ways in our everyday lives as we evaluate our work situations or even our personal relationships. But in the modern sense in which it becomes the basis for social and political struggles against despotism or slavery, equality rests firmly on notions about what human beings are like across cultural and historical differences. The modern conception of equality is based on a rather complex metaphysical idea (formulated most clearly in eighteenth-century Europe) that all humans have in principle a capacity for rational agency, defined as the capacity to reflect upon their own thoughts and actions and hence to guide and determine their own lives. Equality as a moral and political ideal would mean very little, for instance, if it denoted or implied merely sameness of, say, social opportunities or economic resources; indeed it would generate a rather

uninspiring social vision. The real content of equality as an evaluative notion comes from what is implicit in the metaphysical claim that humans, all of us, across class, gender, or cultural lines of division, are capable of governing our lives and, in fact, that our welfare consists partly in the exercising of this capacity. To the extent that inequalities in access to material resources inhibit or impede such exercise, they are seen as morally objectionable, even when they might have the weight of cultural tradition behind them. Underlying this moral conception, then, is a substantive claim about human nature which cannot be valid only within particular cultures. If it is, everything in modern culture that is based on such a claim—the notion of inalienable human rights, for instance, or the very idea of a genuine democracy—would become untenable.

The claim about human nature, specifically about the capacity for rational self-determination, is at the basis of related notions about individual human worth or dignity. Sharply at odds with claims about worth based on social prestige, power, or dignity, this notion of worth grounds our modern political vision of all humans as belonging to a single community to which each of us is morally accountable. The idea is this: individual human worth (in this sense) is not a product of one's social standing and is not even tied to one's meritorious actions or one's moral standing in the community. In fact, the notion of inalienable rights as an ideal is based on a radically egalitarian notion that there is nothing a human individual *needs to do* in order to earn his or her worth (in this sense). Personal merit of even the most admirable kind is irrelevant in this regard; all that matters for this rather extraordinary moral status to be awarded to a person is that he or she exist. It is, as Gregory Vlastos puts it, like the most traditional kind of caste status and privilege acquired at birth. But the difference is crucial: there is only one unique caste—the human species!

In one fundamental respect our society is much more like a caste society (with a *unique* caste) than like [a society that distributes privileges and worth according to merit]. The latter has no place for a rank of dignity which descends on an individual by the purely existential circumstance (the "accident") of birth and remains unalterably for life. To reproduce this feature of our system we would have to look not only to caste-societies, but to extremely rigid ones, since most of them make some provision for elevation in rank for rare merit or degradation for extreme demerit. In our legal system no such thing can happen: even a criminal may not be sentenced to second-class citizenship. . . . And the fact that first-class citizenship, having been made common, is no longer a mark of distinction does not trivialize the privileges it entails. It is the simple truth, not declamation, to speak of it, as I have done, as a "rank of dignity" in some ways comparable to that enjoyed by hereditary nobilities of the past. To see this one

need only think of the position of groups in our society who have been cheated out of this status by the subversion of their constitutional rights.¹⁰

This status, thus, does not exist in degrees. One does not, because of one's actions, acquire more of this kind of status, and neither can one trade it away at will. This radical thesis about human worth does not, however, prescribe sameness and uniformity to humans, for it is not a comprehensive account of human creatures. In fact, it is compatible with there being cultural and even individual differences among such creatures; part of the argument for the notion of human worth, as might be evident by now, is that individual self-determination, individual choice, is held to be a genuine good, and such self-determination leads naturally to the flowering and exploration of differences in how human lives are lived, human capacities realized.

Now, on the realist view I am outlining, the complex and rich moral notion we call "equality" rests on properties of human nature which are discovered and formulated in and around the eighteenth-century, but that does not mean that such discovery was entirely unanticipated. Indeed, momentous moral "discoveries" are rare, and rarely "punctual" or easily localizable. It is not hard to see how earlier claims, made in a variety of cultures and societies, about the soul, or the divinity that resides in each human breast, were anticipations of the modern idea, but they brought with them theological and ideological baggage that needed to be discarded. Moreover, while such theological claims about the soul have indeed been used in progressive ways, in particular in the fight against slavery, the crucial claim that is missing until the eighteenth-century is that the notion of human dignity or worth is not a utopian idea but can be worked out in terms of a realistic and critical social and political theory.

What explains, then, the emergence of this critical account in (roughly) the eighteenth century? This is where the other dimension of values that I mentioned earlier becomes relevant. The notion of equality refers also to (our knowledge of) genuine social and political possibilities. It depends ultimately on concrete historical conditions and what is possible within them, for they shape our moral and theoretical imagination. My view is thus historicist rather than abstract. While my realism about value leaves open room for progress toward greater moral objectivity, it grounds its account of the development of morality and moral knowledge (following Hegel and Marx) in historical and social conditions. As socio-economic forces develop and mature enough so that we can realistically imagine going beyond entrenched inequalities, moral notions like equality become less utopian and airy, more grounded in our increasing knowledge of the social and natural world (and of humans as

a part of that world). In addition, organized social struggles of previously subjugated and subordinated classes and groups open up the imagination (of even an original thinker like a Rousseau or a Kant) to see how freedom, or the power to live and make one's life without chains, is not the province of the socially privileged but of all humans. Moral knowledge thus depends on historical and social factors, as does error or ignorance. In the absence of the right social conditions, in which social equality can be imagined realistically and genuine human features and traits can be detected or accurately intuited, accounts of equality (such as those produced by the classical Greek philosophers) remain limited and provincial. What this kind of realist view of values can offer, then, is an explanation of error as well as of reliable knowledge. Its dual orientation—toward human nature, on the one hand, and toward social and political conditions of the possibility of knowledge, on the other—enables us to see how values can be both historical and objective.

Objectivity and Aesthetic Values

To some readers, the claim that objectivity is possible in ethical and political matters may be easy to grant, but the realm of aesthetic value would appear to be fundamentally different. In the aesthetic sphere, in our judgments about colors and flavors and landscapes and poems, it would seem, to argue for objectivity is to ignore the genuine variety there is in individual and group tastes. It might even be said that a realist who argues for the possibility of objective judgment in aesthetic matters will be blind to the role pernicious social ideologies play in shaping our notions of beauty and ugliness, what pleases and what repels. Now my defense of objectivity in the realm of aesthetics acknowledges that both these points are important. What I propose to do, in sketching a general account of some of how our deepest aesthetic notions (say, beauty) refer outward, beyond a culture's boundaries, is to draw on thinkers like Hume and Dewey to show how basing aesthetics partially in human nature can be liberating for aesthetic inquiry, and how a nonreductive naturalistic view of deep aesthetic values can be perfectly compatible with our desire to account for the innocent differences in individual taste as well as the not-so-innocent (ideological) distortions that are the result of social conflicts and prejudices. My thesis about objectivity in aesthetics is, however, independent of the thesis I have already presented about ethics, even though my argumentative strategy is similar. My primary goal here is to show that such arguments for objectivity can succeed. Thus, except for a few suggestions, I do not intend to make any substantive claims about how aesthetics in general is related to ethics.

Influential studies of aesthetic ideology have appeared during the last few years arguing that the realm that is currently called “the aesthetic” is defined in an idealist way and that our primary task should be to demystify such idealism and reveal its hidden political agenda.¹¹ I agree partly with some of these analyses but would like to suggest that we should first acknowledge that what we call the aesthetic might answer to some genuine needs we have as human creatures, some of which we in fact share with other creatures in the natural world. As John Dewey suggested, the experience of making or responding to artworks provides a profound pleasure in many instances, but this pleasure—or more generally the experience itself—should be understood in the context of other areas of human life where similar responses are elicited from us. He argued that we misunderstand our experience with artworks if we do not see the continuity between it and other similar (sometimes less intense) experiences—responding to flowers and sunsets, engaging in warfare, and rearing children. Like all natural creatures, we engage in creating and procreating, satisfying our various desires and needs and attempting to survive against odds. An adequate account of art, Dewey suggested, needs to guard against relegating it to “a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement.”¹² What would such an “association” achieve? Dewey’s argument is that it will show us how, notwithstanding its grander and more ethereal flights, art is also based in our connections to the rest of nature, and acknowledging these connections can help us discern some of the roots of the formal and rhythmic qualities that move us so deeply:

Art is . . . prefigured in the very processes of living. A bird builds its nest and a beaver its dam when internal organic pressures cooperate with external materials so that the former are fulfilled and the latter are transformed in a satisfying culmination. We may hesitate to apply the word “art,” since we doubt the presence of directive intent. But all deliberation, all conscious intent, grows out of things once performed organically through the interplay of natural energies. . . . The distinguishing contribution of man is consciousness of the relations found in nature. . . . Apart from the relations of processes of rhythmic conflict and fulfillment in animal life, experience would be without design and pattern. . . . The primeval arts of nature and animal life are so much the material, and, in gross outline, so much the model for the intentional achievements of man, that the theologically minded have imputed conscious intent to the structure of nature—as man, sharing many activities with the ape, is wont to think of the latter as imitating his own performances. (*AE* 24–25)

Dewey’s attempt to naturalize aesthetics is thus partly an attempt to detheologize it. The connections among social and biological rhythms

on the one hand, and the more developed aesthetic ones on the other, Dewey suggests, are open to complex empirical verification, and what these connections will show us is the extent to which aesthetic experiences are also based in our nature, our species-specific history and our biological endowment. This will not debase the higher moral or spiritual aspirations many glimpse in our deeper aesthetic experiences; it will, rather, help us understand ourselves more fully, as natural creatures with propensities, needs, and desires which often make us reach toward the starry skies above.

This naturalist account helps make sense of my realist claim that some of our deepest aesthetic notions (like beauty) refer in part to human nature. On this account, what gives an object (a painting, a landscape, even a meal) aesthetic value is that it provides deep and abiding satisfaction (rather than simply pleasure) to us, given our needs as humans. The kind of objectivity we are talking about, then, is not completely aperspectival: indeed, there is no (aesthetic) value without basic reference to what we are like as humans, to the way we happen to be constituted, contingently. We might have been built differently, with a different range or register of responses. It is quite possible that extraterrestrials—say, Martians—will have a different set of sensory responses and will find aesthetic value in things to which we do not respond. All that is not only possible but quite likely, given the naturalist account Dewey provides and the one some have derived from David Hume's writings on taste. Peter Railton, developing the kind of naturalist account I have been suggesting here, puts this very vividly:

Might there be something deserving the name "Martian beauty" even if it were quite different from what we recognize to be beauty? How would we understand this? How would we interpret "This image leaves us cold, but it possesses true Martian beauty"? Such a remark need not mean that Martians find it to have the distinctive qualities *we* identify as beauty-making—for example, particular structures, symmetries, harmonies, and palettes. For we can understand well enough that Martians might be sufficiently dissimilar from us that they would not find excitement or delight in the forms or palettes that please us. Martians might even have quite different senses. Yet don't we understand what it would be for them to have a distinctively aesthetic practice of *evaluating beauty*? It would be (*inter alia*) for them to have a practice using distinctive terms, which they take to be normative, for those objects that have a general, robust match with *their* sensory and cognitive capacities for experiences *they* intrinsically desire.¹³

Railton points out, for instance, that the preference humans seem to display cross-culturally for bilateral symmetry can be explained naturalistically, and it may not be shared by Martians, who (given their "radially symmetric, intelligent subterranean life" [85]) may be (*typically*) left

cold by the “front elevations of our great pyramids, cathedral, totems, stately houses, tombs, and burial mounds” (85), which we find so moving. They may, instead, prefer “our hot mud springs and our undersea manganese nodules” (85). Railton asks: “Does our aesthetic discourse depend for its interest and authority on a claim that Martian beauty is at best only Martian beauty, while human beauty is beauty itself?” (85) Our deepest aesthetic values are clearly relational, grounded in what we humans happen to be like contingently. But to say that what constitutes aesthetic value for us is not part of the architecture of the extrahuman cosmos is not to deny it objectivity. It may not hold for all sentient creatures but if it holds (potentially) for all humans because of our common genetic endowment, it is objective enough! To claim that only completely universal and invariable values are objective is to reify objectivity and to have an inaccurate picture of what values are.

I have been pointing to a level at which our aesthetic responses are shaped innately, by human nature. No doubt, there are other major influences on our complex responses to television sitcoms and designer clothes, to Kalidas and Homer. The point of this naturalistic redefinition of aesthetics is to open up the possibility that there is, as Railton puts it, an “infrastructure” for the field of aesthetic value (67 ff.). The basic claim derives from Hume, who suggested in his famous essay “Of the Standard of Taste” how “Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structures of the internal fabric are calculated to please, and others to displease,” especially a human creature with “sound” organs of perception and cognition. “Though it be certain that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment. . . ,” Hume argued, “there are certain qualities in objects which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings.”¹⁴ To call such a match between the sensory-cognitive capacities of humans and aspects of their world the “infrastructure of value” is to point to causal connections and to suggest where fruitful empirical hypotheses can be formulated. Dewey’s suggestion about the need for rhythmic structures, about the ground on which narrative pleasures are based (*AE* 37-38), or Railton’s Humean theses about what kinds of symmetry please us and why, provide organizing hypotheses or frameworks for inquiry.

What the thesis about value’s infrastructure cannot do, and what it was never meant to do, is explain all our evaluative judgments in a deterministic way. But if this naturalist thesis is plausible, it provides an interesting account of how human solidarities can be grounded not only in common beliefs and historical struggles but also in our animal-like nature, our inbuilt propensities and capacities for deep emotional and cognitive response. Cathedrals and temples, sunsets and deserts, even

horrific spectacles that we cannot tear our eyes away from, all have formed the bases for social cohesion. If we understand why we need circuses (and not just bread), what exactly it is in us that fuels this need, we would be better prepared to imagine what a truly progressive (say, democratic and antiauthoritarian) cultural pedagogy would be like. If the aesthetic points to a dimension of our lives that is genuine but susceptible to ideological manipulation, we need to understand how and why this is so.

Unless we do so, we may learn to demystify the dominant ideology but we—progressive critics and teachers—will not be able to propose powerful alternatives to that ideology. Alternatives to the dominant ideology cannot succeed if they are based on unrealistic idealizations of (say, rational) human behavior; such ideologies need to be grounded in our genuine capacities for powerful feeling and emotional response, capacities which can be harnessed for both good and evil. If this naturalistic thesis about the aesthetic is sound, we have to recognize the limited power of ideas—of *only* ideas—to shape a critical and reflexive subjectivity; like Aristotle, we need to explore (against the Socratic view that knowledge, by itself, constitutes virtue) how and why we learn and act in new ways, what *nonideational* bases there might be for changes in character, in our habits and our stable dispositions. To identify the “infrastructure” of value is thus not to advocate a determinist view of our evaluative practices but rather to explain the range of options that are *typically* available to us. It is not to reduce history to nature but instead to see how history and nature together produce the environment through which we perceive our selves and create our lives.

It might be useful, then, to consider how even some of the deeper aesthetic notions (like beauty) are inevitably social and historical, constrained as I said earlier by what we know and can imagine about our social and political possibilities. While such notions can refer accurately to some central features of human nature, such features are discovered only through the kind of sustained practice and contact with aesthetic experience which only a certain amount of leisure and independence from everyday responsibilities makes possible. Thus it would not be surprising if members of societies that are engaged primarily in warfare or in all-consuming labor for basic survival cannot experiment enough with aesthetic experiences (that are in principle always available to them) so as to be able to realize the significance of such experiences in their lives. It would be almost impossible for them to elaborate rich aesthetic notions, which are always products of sustained intellectual and practical work. In societies where such possibilities for leisure exist (because of the development of sophisticated social negotiation to avoid warfare or of efficient distribution of resources to satisfy basic material

needs), “inquiry” into and discovery of genuine aesthetic needs and values becomes more likely.

It is an unfortunate fact of human history that such a realm of aesthetic practice (and implicitly aesthetic inquiry) has almost always existed by virtue of oppressive and unjust systems in which only a few can enjoy and practice what we might call aesthetic “goods.” Even in such limited and unjust settings, however, real aesthetic discovery has been possible. One can argue that fuller exploration of such “discoveries” and the elaboration of aesthetic notions are more likely in less unjust social organizations, when those possibilities of aesthetic experience are available to a wider range of people. When new social relations become imaginable, aesthetic notions are sometimes revised and extended. In nineteenth-century Europe, for instance, when ideas about equality deepened in response to genuine possibilities of the extension of democracy (no matter how limited the existing reality), visionary writers like George Eliot were able to extend the notion of beauty (say, beautiful human features) to include much that was earlier left out of it: namely, the coarser features of peasants, which are the result of years of backbreaking labor, or even the humdrum features of ordinary people who were not born looking like heroes and heroines of romantic novels. Consider, in this famous passage from *Adam Bede*, how beauty itself is in the process of being redefined. The narrator’s discursive gesture is not unlike that of a bold and innovative critic urging us to read and appreciate a neglected body of writing, inviting us to go beyond our limited aesthetic response to a fuller one. Indeed, the “discovery” of new kinds of beauty is predicated on the development and refinement of the reader’s innate responsive, appreciative, consciousness:

All honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form! Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women, and children—in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy. Paint us an angel, if you can, with a floating violet robe, and a face paled by celestial light; paint us yet oftener a Madonna, turning her mild face upward and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory; but do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world—those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions. In this world there are so many of these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence, else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy, and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. Therefore let Art always remind us of them;

therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things—men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them.¹⁵

What I want to emphasize is that Eliot is introducing a thesis about beauty here, and this thesis can be challenged. The claim that there is an “other beauty” with its basis in “the secret of deep human sympathy,” is not self-evidently true and it should not be treated as such. In other words, it is perfectly possible for someone to counter Eliot’s thesis by saying something like the following: what Eliot’s narrator is doing is to confuse our appreciation of beauty in human features with moral considerations (sympathy). It is the fact of the matter, this person would argue, that only “proportion” points to the beautiful, and disproportion does not. But that does not mean (Eliot’s adversary in this debate would go on) than we should not care about—feel for, sympathize with, and even love—individuals whose physical features are disproportionate. We would, however, be doing so for reasons other than aesthetic ones. Beauty is proportion; although of course we can, and should, love disproportionate features.

On the interpretation I am offering, however, Eliot (like several others around that time) is proposing that the criteria for detecting beauty be extended and that at least as far as the beauty of human form is concerned, our ideas about social equality and about the moral desirability of forming social bonds with (potentially) all humankind can transform our conception of beauty. In particular, these ideas can radically alter our conception of how central the “secret of proportion” is to “beauty”; when we choose to live in a world that is not of “extremes,” of unrealistic idealizations, we shall come to perceive physical beauty as consisting not only in “proportion” but also in those new attributes we detect through our feelings of solidarity with our fellow creatures, whose “coarse” features are transfigured as “the light of heaven falls” on them. This is, then, a thesis about beauty and about the human capacity to respond to our world. Eliot would argue with her critic by raising metacritical issues; beauty, she would be saying in effect, is much more complex than our traditional criteria (like “proportionateness”) indicate, and that is so in part because our human capacity to respond “aesthetically” is dependent on (or at least tied to) our affective responses in the nonaesthetic realms. Here, then, is room for genuine disagreement. It may well be that Eliot is right, and that the way her critic would come to see this is by looking at the alternative definition of beauty Eliot is proposing—the definition implicit in the metaphysical claim about the complex interactions among our (human) aesthetic

and moral responses. Such a claim refers to human nature as such, and should be treated like any such claim ought to be, instead of being dismissed outright as a confusion of beauty with morality, the aesthetic with the extra-aesthetic. The connection among these different domains is exactly what is being redefined, and Eliot's thesis invites both theoretical and empirical testing and elaboration.

But then doesn't this discovery, that our ideas about beauty, one of the deep aesthetic notions, can change and be improved, contradict the naturalist claim that aesthetic notions refer to human nature? Shouldn't the objectivity of "human nature" underwrite one (and no more than one) stable conception of beauty, to which our aesthetic notions could refer? The simple answer to both questions is No. A naturalist-realist grounding of aesthetic value in human nature implies that there are kinds of response that are typical of human beings, but this does not mean that such responses are easy to detect or define. If the debate as I have staged it between George Eliot and her more traditional adversary is a plausible one, it suggests how—to argue for Eliot's position, which is close to my own—aesthetic responses are not simple but complex, and even the accurate detection of beauty is itself dependent on feelings and ideas that are in themselves not aesthetic. That means that if Eliot is right, the traditional aesthetic isolation (of at least the perception or detection) of beauty blinds us to the objective nature of beauty, beauty as it is (as it can ideally be) for human creatures. Beauty, as we saw above, is a human phenomenon, but not thereby purely arbitrary or subjective; of course we can be wholly or partially wrong about it. Such error will not, however, be a simple error of observation, a mere misperception of beautiful objects or beauty-making properties. Rather, the error is often (as it is in this case) theoretical—that is, it arises from our mistaken notion that criteria of the beautiful (proportion, symmetry, and so forth) are always applicable in a similar way, no matter what the object under consideration: skyscrapers, landscapes, or human faces. Eliot's point would be that such a context-free notion of beauty is defective, mainly because (to consider her example here) our aesthetic perception of fellow humans is never narrowly aesthetic in the traditional sense indicated above. What this disagreement between Eliot and her adversary in this debate would indicate to a realist is that there is meaningful disagreement precisely because both sides share a common point of reference: the beauty of the human form, especially in the context of what beauty is (more generally) for us humans. On the view I am sketching, then, aesthetic inquiry is inevitably dialectical and open-ended partly because it is grounded in our historically contingent knowledge about (human) nature.

Now it would be extravagant to claim, on the basis of one passage

from one of her novels, that George Eliot is a naturalist-realist about aesthetic value. But my point here is not about Eliot's beliefs: I am using a view articulated by the narrator of *Adam Bede* as an example of how, if such a narrator held the kind of view about aesthetics I have defended above, she might believe in the objectivity of aesthetic values without agreeing with the current definition of what such values consist in. She would, like other realists about value, look not only for alternative and more supple criteria for identifying beauty but also attempt to explain (for instance) how we come to misperceive beauty because of social prejudices against peasants and laborers. In providing such an explanation, she would be looking at the role pernicious ideologies play in distorting our understanding of aspects of ourselves and our world. Whether or not the distortion or misperception of value is the result of social prejudice, realists would be more generally interested in understanding how our ideas about aesthetic value originate and how they function in the social realm; because they are interested in objectivity they would see evaluative claims (such as the one about the centrality of the criterion of "proportion") as *corrigible* formulations, open to revision and improvement. Such formulations include their own theses about beauty, which they would present as unavoidably fallible theses about the nature of human (aesthetic and moral) response. Such theses about objective beauty do not point to ideal Forms but rather to key properties of human nature, which we come to discover in highly mediated, historically contingent, ways. As I have been indicating in discussing how values refer outward, such theses and insights would be shaped by our ongoing negotiations with the wider world—by political struggles, for instance, which allow us to see how class or gender relations can be restructured more equitably.

Objectivity and the Multicultural Curriculum

The epistemic defense of value I have outlined here is, then, a strong alternative to the postmodernist argument, which depends on implausible theses about the relationship between power and knowledge and an intransigent skepticism about objectivity as an epistemic ideal. If, as the realist account suggests, our ethical and aesthetic evaluations are indeed historical and social, and they (in many crucial cases) also refer outward to human nature, then the kind of skepticism I identified may not be a reasonable position. Moreover, for defenders of multiculturalism, the realist view would be attractive because it provides a nonrelativist defense of the need for cultural and social diversity. Since our deeper ethical and aesthetic concepts are necessarily theory-laden, ideological,

and culturally inflected, the realist can argue that the best form of inquiry into the nature of value, aesthetic or ethical, will need to be comparative and cross-cultural. Error and knowledge are both thrown in sharper relief when the theoretical and experimental field is widened; and cross-cultural inquiry becomes necessary because we wish to avoid cultural parochialism and provincialism. On this view, then, multiculturalism itself becomes in part a kind of comparative *epistemic* project; it represents a social and political ideal to be defended because of the objective knowledge—about human nature and human welfare—that it can enable us to achieve. If cultural practices are implicitly forms of inquiry, then a healthy multicultural society becomes a model for the best kind of epistemic cooperation; it becomes an ideal laboratory for inquiry about values.¹⁶

The subject of multiculturalism brings me to a few practical considerations about the literature curriculum at universities and colleges that are grappling with the need for comparative and cross-cultural studies. What I propose follows both from my thesis about the objectivity of value and from what I have suggested about the relation between ethics and aesthetics. I have argued against a purely skeptical attitude toward aesthetic value, but I am not convinced that while aesthetic concepts like beauty can be based in objective features of human response they ought—at least for now—to be reintroduced by progressive critics as self-evidently valuable, to be detected by trained students of art and literature. For one thing, if George Eliot's thesis is plausible, we need to pay much more attention to those moments in the history of a culture when the traditionally accepted ideas about what constitutes beauty in a given domain are challenged in a principled and sustained way. When someone (like, say, Eliot's narrator) who believes that beauty might be objectively detected has serious doubts about the adequacy or accuracy of the criteria for detecting beauty that are currently dominant in her society, such doubts themselves provide the best testing ground for discussion of aesthetic evaluation. That is because they will force us to look at relevant historical and ideological considerations, while keeping open the possibility that we might be on to something genuinely "aesthetic," genuinely valuable across ideological and cultural divisions.

Second, since it is overwhelmingly likely that the dominant views about literary and aesthetic value in most American universities (to take one example) are for the most part informed by mainly the Western traditions, discussion of the objectivity of value will tend to be ethnocentric and ideological even with the best of intentions. One way out of this problem, if you take the realist view seriously, is to make every such course on aesthetic value into one where the primary emphasis is comparative and cross-cultural. A thoughtfully planned, team-taught

course on comparative aesthetics may in fact help make students (and their teachers) less smug about their own cultural categories and more open to an objective assessment of the difficulty of particular judgments about aesthetic value.

But it may be that the greatest challenge to such a course or curriculum (not considering, for the moment, the practical difficulties of accurately representing the views of oral cultures) is that not every culture has assigned the same role to (aesthetic) beauty that the modern West has. Thus, while many traditional societies may have a view that the response to beauty is a deep and universally valid one, in principle available to all humans, they often also argue (anticipating George Eliot's views) that to isolate such a response would be to grossly misperceive the nature of the more complex response of which it is a (limited) part. To take merely one instance, Abhinavagupta, commenting on Bharata's *Natyashastra* and contemporary Indian aesthetics and metaphysics in his tenth- and eleventh-century treatises, can be read as suggesting that even our full response to beauty ("aesthetic relish") is only a small part of a more complex and meaningful meditational-contemplative response to the world. The latter response, it can be argued, should inform all aesthetic inquiry as well, since to see the aesthetic response as autonomous would be (according to this tradition) to make a serious error about the nature of human beings and their welfare. It would not be hard to imagine other, more radical interlocutors, who would question the central role ascribed to beauty itself. While arguing that it exists as a human phenomenon, they could go on to claim that it plays only a minor role in human lives since its value is merely instrumental: it is valuable because it is one of *several* ways that humans gain access to a deep aspect of themselves. Aesthetic experiences point beyond themselves to other, fuller experiences and possibilities—like those available now only to, say, a seer or a mystic.¹⁷ On this view, genuine aesthetic experiences are unavoidably linked to ethical and metaphysical values and perspectives, and they can enlarge our conception of what it means to be more fully human—that is, they can radically deepen and alter our existing conceptions of human flourishing.

From the vantage point of such cross-cultural challenges, one can see more clearly why George Eliot's thesis as I presented it in a purely intracultural debate can be both unsettling and liberating. Not only can it improve the traditional criteria Eliot seems to be criticizing, it can also open up for investigation more basic questions about the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical. My central proposal, then, is that (at least for now) we make more of our courses comparative and cross-cultural, and focus centrally on *the complex relationship between ethical and aesthetic values*. Instead of deciding in advance which of these kinds of

value is more basic, it might be best to take the relationship itself as the theoretical and historical question to be examined, a question that other cultures have explored (and sometimes settled) in different ways. The belief that values can be objective, combined with relevant and complex cross-cultural knowledge, will enable students to deal maturely with uncertainties and the absence of resolution of *some* issues, without (to borrow Keats's words) the "irritable reaching after fact and reason." It will prepare them to be better judges of their own lives, as well as of the world around them. In fact, they might learn from such sustained inquiries into value that what the world and our own nature demand of us is both an attitude of honest, open appreciation of the value there is around us and an attitude of humility as we make our own judgments, as we shape and remake ourselves as human agents. It will enable them to be such judges and agents by exposing them to the potential riches of a genuinely multicultural world, in which historically entrenched inequalities do not limit us to ethnocentric views of ourselves and our futures, and liberating cross-cultural contact is sought for epistemic and moral reasons rather than merely sentimental ones.

Notice, then, that this view of multiculturalism is fundamentally nonrelativist, that is, it does not depend on extreme arguments about the radical alterity of other cultures. This realist definition of multiculturalism suggests why cultural diversity should not be merely tolerated, but rather defended in its best forms for good epistemic reasons, the same reasons we draw on to demand the democratization of any kind of intellectual research or inquiry. But what are the best forms of multiculturalism? Clearly, answers to that question will not follow self-evidently from the theoretical arguments I have advanced here. These answers will be themselves shaped by the empirical variety we face in different social contexts, and so, naturally, the answers will depend on the details. But acknowledgment of such contextual variety and complexity is a necessary part of all reflexive and rigorous inquiry, and it becomes especially important when we are dealing with the kind of social-theoretical questions that any discussion of multiculturalism raises.

What I have tried to suggest in this final section is that there is a strong defense of multiculturalism which becomes available to us when we go beyond the postmodernist skepticism about value. In the course of this essay I hope to have clarified my proposal that values should be defined in this realist way, emphasizing both their social embeddedness and their epistemic dimension. My proposal was built on my account of one of the deepest arguments for the postmodernist's skepticism and relativism about value, which I identified as an extreme form of epistemological holism. I showed why this argument is unsatisfactory and outlined an alternative view, a more nuanced and plausible *realist*

view, that while there is no hope of attaining a completely neutral and bias-free view of values, a richer conception of theory-dependent objectivity is essential for productive human inquiry, particularly inquiry into values. Central to the alternative view I sketched is the rejection of *a priori* accounts of the place of (social and ideological) error in human evaluation, and the counterproposal that such questions be opened up to empirical investigation. I suggest that the skeptical thesis has now become doctrinal, rather than an open-ended intellectual claim or hypothesis, since it is asserted and repeated more often than it is defended or examined. But if a theoretical doctrine appears to shut off more doors for cautious and responsible human inquiry than it leaves open, it might suggest the need to reexamine it and to consider alternative accounts and explanations. In my defense of the objectivity of value, I hope to have proposed one such alternative.

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NOTES

1 Satya P. Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

2 For an elaboration of these ideas, see my *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, chapters 6 and 7; see also, Moya's Introduction and the essay by Caroline Hau in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García (Berkeley, 2000).

3 See, in addition to the discussion that follows, the brief discussion of Donna Haraway's notion of error in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, pp. 215–16 n. 19.

4 Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky, "Human Nature," in *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind*, ed. Fons Elders (London, 1974), pp. 173–74; hereafter cited in text.

5 Many postmodernist thinkers implicitly assume such impossible views of objectivity or truth when they make their epistemological arguments against objectivity. See, for example, the discussion in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* of Paul de Man (chapter 1, especially pp. 39–42) and also the discussion of Laclau and Mouffe's critique of the notion of objective social interests (chapter 7, pp. 212–13 n. 16).

6 Foucault says, "I admit to not being able to define, nor for even stronger reasons to propose, an ideal social model for the functioning of our . . . society" ("Human Nature," pp. 170–1). But his underlying arguments about power and knowledge apply not just to "ideal" (in the sense of "perfect") social models but also, as I have pointed out, to "better" ones (than what we have now)—compare his suspicion of the idea of a "purer justice." So it is not clear how we can criticize existing institutions to reveal their ideological distortions, which is part of what Foucault clearly wants to do: "It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticise the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked . . ." (p. 171). How can we talk about the "political violence" of existing institutions without drawing on normative notions, as well as on some conception of how such institutions can be "better," more "just"? There is a basic confusion here. For a discussion of this kind of confusion more generally, see Charles Taylor, "Foucault on

Freedom and Truth," in his *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophic Papers 2* (New York, 1985), pp. 152–84.

7 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Value/Evaluation," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago, 1990), p. 180; hereafter cited in text.

8 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 15–16; hereafter cited in text.

9 In both ways, however, they represent more than simply empirical information: that is, they include hunches and guesses, drawing on the imagination to make rational conjectures. This feature of values does not make them epistemically suspect, however, but rather—as the postpositivist philosophy of science tells us—fundamentally akin to any legitimate area of human inquiry: simultaneously empirical and theoretical, dependent for its progress not only on the right methodologies but also on social ideologies and practice. See Richard Boyd, "How To Be a Moral Realist," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), pp. 181–228, and Philip Kitcher, "The Naturalists Return," *The Philosophical Review*, 10 (1992), 53–114. On reference, see the essay by Boyd, and the references in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, chapter 2.

10 Gregory Vlastos, "Justice and Equality," in *Social Justice*, ed. Richard B. Brandt (Englewood Hills, N. J., 1962), pp. 46–47.

11 See, for example, Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis, 1996). See also the valuable sociological (but, from my perspective, ultimately one-sided) analysis, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

12 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934), p. 3; hereafter cited in text as *AE*.

13 Peter Railton, "Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge, 1998), p. 84; hereafter cited in text.

14 David Hume, "Of the Standards of Taste," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (New York, 1993), pp. 140, 141.

15 George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (New York, 1985), p. 224.

16 The following discussion is best read in conjunction with *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, chapter 7, esp. pp. 234–51 ("Universalism, Particularism, and Multicultural Politics").

17 On this last subject, see Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York, 1993).