

2007

The Practice of Value – Reply

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Recommended Citation

Joseph Raz, *The Practice of Value – Reply*, THE PRACTICE OF VALUE, R. JAY WALLACE, ED., OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2003; OXFORD LEGAL STUDIES RESEARCH PAPER (2007).

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Reply

The privilege of having three sets of extensive and hard-hitting comments on one's work is as welcome as it is rare, and especially so on this occasion as the lectures were, for me, but the first (well, not entirely first) stab at a subject I hope to explore at greater length. The reflections that follow will respond to some of the criticisms, but will not be a point by point reply. I will use the occasion to clarify some obscurities in the lectures, and to contrast my view with some of my critics' own positions. I will proceed thematically, starting with some observations about method and about ontology, proceeding to explore several questions about the relations between social dependence and relativism, between genre, value, and normativity, and concluding with a few words on pluralism and liberal values.

Method and ontology

My aim is explanation, explanation of concepts which are central to our practical thought, to our understanding of ourselves as persons, capable of intentional action, namely an explanation of the closely related concepts of value, of being a value, and of having value or being of value. In explaining a concept we explain aspects of that of which it is a concept. An explanation of the concept of value is a (partial) explanation of the nature (i.e. essential properties) of value. And as the differences between explaining concepts and explaining the nature of what they are concepts of is immaterial for the current discussion I will proceed on the assumption that the lectures aimed at this dual task, which is discharged, for the most part, by the same explanations (often suitably modified to apply either to value or to the concept of value).¹ I make no claim that it is impossible to understand the notions of being a person, or of reason or intentional action, without using the concepts I am trying to explain. It is merely that for those who have them they play a central role in understanding intentions, reason and persons, and that for those who have them possessing other routes to an explanation of intentions and persons involves understanding how those other concepts relate to the value concepts which are the subject of these lectures. For those who have them the understanding of intentional action, and of being a person, and of much else depends, among other things, on understanding the interrelations between their concepts and value-concepts.

¹ On this as on many other points in the lectures and the reply I will be relying on arguments I advanced elsewhere, especially in **Engaging Reason** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). To avoid tedium I will not refer again to that book. But let me mention that the view of concepts presupposed here is

Neither my lectures nor the comments on them embarked on an extended discussion of the methodological assumptions behind the enterprise, and it would be inappropriate to do so here, except to the extent that some methodological issues are pertinent to an evaluation of several critical observations made by Korsgaard, Pippin and Williams. Before I turn to them two brief and general remarks regarding the nature of the explanatory task as I see it. First, it is a constructive-theoretical task. It aims at explaining central concepts, concepts which can be compared to crucial links at important junctions connecting central features of our thought, and thus contributing importantly to the structure of our thoughts. But the idea of a concept used in philosophical analysis generally, and mine is no exception, while being recognizably related to ‘concept’ in its ordinary meaning, deviates from it considerably in pursuit of theoretical aims.² It is part of the enterprise of explaining the basic features of human thought, an enterprise which gives concepts a central role in articulating those features. So the explanation of concepts is an explanation of human thought as we know it, using the notion of a concept as a tool of analysis.

I do not assume, and indeed do not believe, that there is a fixed budget of philosophical problems the explanation of which is the perennial task of all philosophy. Rather, I assume that there are indefinitely many philosophical puzzles, different ones gaining prominence at different times, different ones being felt as pressing at different times. The task of explanation is never ending. Still, there are some typical philosophical preoccupations and one of them is the desire to explain the possibility of a unified worldview, that is, one where our understanding of any domain coheres with our understanding of all other domains. Many recent writings about practical thought aim at presenting a so-called naturalistic view of practical thought, because the writers believe that the only way to reconcile practical thought with our world view is to show how it can be integrated in a naturalistic world view. I am not confident of the cogency of the ideal of ‘a naturalistic worldview’, but the aim of explaining the coherent relations between our practical thought and other domains of thought is one of the background goals of my lectures.

Do my commentators share this understanding of the task? It may appear that they do not, but matters are not altogether clear. Pippin explicitly criticizes my conception of my own endeavours:

delineated with a little more detail in “Two Views of the Nature of the Theory of Law: A Partial Comparison”, *Legal Theory* 4 (1998), pp. 249-282, reprinted in J. Coleman (ed.), *Hart’s Postscript* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

² The same is true of the concept of ‘the nature of ...’ or of ‘essence’. They too are philosophical concepts, used as they are for theoretical reasons, and not identical with the concepts expressed by these words in non-philosophical English.

Parenthetically, we might raise the question of how politically and socially conservative Raz's position might be. ... This question arises because, even though Raz's "separation thesis" between explanation of existence, and evaluation of value would allow "for radical criticism of social practices", that criticism would appear bounded in a way by the results of the social dependence thesis, and bounded in a way that suggests that the separation of social explanation of value from first-person evaluation itself, is already breaking down. There are apparently normatively relevant consequences to be drawn from the social dependence thesis: there are some values about which it is "pointless" to argue; proposing new values without due attention to context and realizability can lead to "fanaticism"; and the social dependence thesis "points to caution in understanding the contribution of such revolutionary innovations".[\[REF\]](#)

"Separation thesis" is Pippin's coinage, presumably referring to two of my claims. First, that the enterprise I am engaged in is one of explanation of aspects of central concepts like that of a value, and not the enterprise of establishing what values there are, or what is of value and what is not. Second, the more substantive claim that, conventional goods apart, the existence (or absence) of a sustaining social practice is not part of the case for establishing that something, say fraternity, is a value, or that something, say chastity, is not. Neither of these claims is challenged by the, to my mind, correct observations Pippin is making in the quotation above (and related ones elsewhere in his comment).

Pippin seems to me right, and I never denied, that an explanation of a concept can have normative, or evaluative³ consequences. It is easy to think of propositions which, if true, are part of an account of (the concept of) value and which have normative implications. For example, it is plausible to think that a reasonably comprehensive, correct account of value will entail either that nothing of value can exist, or its negation, that is that possibly something of value exists. Or that a reasonably comprehensive, correct account of value will entail either that there cannot be any values, or its negation, that is that there are some values.⁴ Needless to say if a correct account of value entails either of these propositions then it has normative implications. It follows that it is possible for a correct account of value to have normative implications, and that it is plausible to think that any reasonably comprehensive correct account has such implications. There are many other normative implications which correct accounts of value have, and it is impossible to enumerate or exhaustively describe their general character independently of knowledge of the content of that account.

³ Except where otherwise indicated I use the terms interchangeably

⁴ Regarding both examples it is possible that neither of the theses would be entailed by an account of the nature of value. But given (a) that an account of a concept (or of the nature of that of which it is a concept) is likely to be informative about the possibility of its instantiation, and (b) that such propositions, central to the understanding of the concept, object or property in question, will not lack truth value, it is plausible to make the assumption I make in the text.

Needless to say there are other ways in which a correct understanding of the nature of value can quite properly affect people's normative views. People's views are often based on or supported by confused notions of the nature of value, whose dissolution will help people to avoid making evaluative mistakes.

Perhaps I should add here that there is another separation thesis which my lectures do not entail, and which I believe to be unfounded. Some people may hold that while a correct account of the nature of value is likely to have normative implications, its cogency cannot be properly supported by evaluative considerations. A more plausible version of this view distinguishes between normative considerations which apply specifically to theory-construction and other normative considerations. It claims that only the first kind of normative considerations bear on the cogency of accounts of value, but not the second kind. I do not believe that this exclusion or separation can be sustained. Our understanding of the nature of value inevitably derives in part from what we take to be obvious or clear cases of values: Freedom, beauty etc. I do not mean that our views that this or that is a clear case of a value cannot be revised, or that it cannot be revised in light of an improved understanding of the nature of value. Such revisability is consistent with the fact that part of the case for any account is that this or that is a clear or obvious case of value. Hence evaluative considerations do legitimately count in favour of the account of the nature of value. We are very far from affirming the separation thesis that Pippin rejects.

Pippin points to several considerations which he takes to be inconsistent with the separation thesis. One of them is that there can be successful reductive explanations of value claims:

Surely, [he writes] there are some value claims for which a reductive explanation (one which attends to what people believe are values, but doesn't look any longer for evaluative justifications) is appropriate. [\[REF\]](#)

And to be sure there are such cases (though I do not think that the explanations involved are reductive). My claim was that the correctness of 'value-claims' can be established only by appeal to other value-claims (though one may appeal to the circumstances in which people acquired their evaluative beliefs to establish the probability that they are correct: they may have had reliable teachers, etc.). The same is true of establishing that people's evaluative beliefs are unfounded. That too can be established only by appeal to evaluative considerations (if only because establishing that an evaluative belief is mistaken often amounts to establishing that its negation - also an evaluative belief - is correct). However, here too there is room to appeal to the circumstances in which the belief was acquired or held to explain why a mistaken belief appeared credible. Such explanations of error are particularly pressing when the mistaken belief is

widespread and the circumstances in which it is held make it difficult to accept that everyone could have been mistaken. Such doubts may undermine the credibility of (evaluative) arguments to establish that it is mistaken. Explanations of why the error occurred, how the erroneous view could have seemed plausible, etc., are therefore valuable in reinforcing the evaluative arguments against the views concerned.

On occasion the circumstances under which a view is held may be such as to undermine the credibility of those who hold it thus. Given those circumstances we may deny that they are reasonable to hold it, even when we do not know why the view is implausible, or what is wrong with the reasons (if any) which those who hold it think they have for it. In these cases explanations of why the belief is held do all the work: we may have no other reason to doubt the belief but, knowing that it is held because ..., we cannot have any faith in it. We realise that we would hold it whether or not it was true, that our belief is not sensitive to its truth; that it is immune to critical-rational control and will not change in response to rational considerations only. Therefore that it cannot be trusted.

It is possible that Pippin and I agree or at least that we do not disagree, it is possible that he said nothing inconsistent with my view on the relationship between explanation of value and justification. If so then how 'politically and socially conservative' is my position? When the phrase is used in its main meaning being conservative is not a matter of rejecting or affirming any value. Rather, it is a matter either of epistemic caution in concluding that one understands the values correctly (that is the context of my observation about fanaticism to which Pippin refers) or of minding the possible adverse consequences of a single-minded pursuit of some values, of not allowing oneself to be blinded to the relevance of other values. In its secondary meaning 'being conservative' means supporting certain substantive evaluative views, that is those which are at the time of speaking thought of to be such as are predominantly supported by people who are properly or excessively conservative (depending on the speaker's own views on these matters).

Pippin points to various ways in which some of my observations can be used in support of conservative caution. But at no point does he either allege or show that they can be *correctly* used to support wrong views. Perhaps his reticence is just a matter of politeness, but it is important nonetheless. There is nothing in the social dependence thesis, or in my arguments for it, which supports the status quo and opposes change, or which supports "traditional values", say traditional ideals of the family, and opposes "new values", say values which sanction non-traditional forms of personal relationships. Besides, I am not sure that my position is relevant to the concerns he gestures towards. One does not need to accept the social dependence thesis to argue cogently that 'there are some values about which it is "pointless" to argue' or that

‘proposing new values without due attention to context and realizability can lead to “fanaticism”’. These are vague, but so far as they go sound points to make, the merit of which is visible to all, whatever their understanding of value.

I will revisit these and related matters when commenting on ‘liberal values’ and the like. For the time being let me return to the question whether we all share the same understanding of the enterprise we are engaged in. Williams, e.g., writes

I am not convinced that we are helped in thinking about these things, and I suspect that we are hindered, by asking questions about the conditions under which various values exist. I do not think we would lose anything if we dropped this way of speaking altogether.[\[REF\]](#)

When the enterprise is explanatory, one may think, the advice ‘let’s drop this way of speaking’ is out of place. Does that not show that Williams is engaged in a different enterprise? But as usual things are not that simple. Is Williams advocating conceptual reform? This is not clear, but if he is what could be the grounds for such reform? Conceptual reform can be a result of analysis which uncovers incoherence in our concepts (the classical example, however controversial its success, is Russell’s revision of the concept of a set to avoid his own set paradox). It could also be a result of analysis which establishes incongruence between the presuppositions underlying the use of some concepts and fundamental aspects of our worldview. Williams has argued in other publications that values do not belong to the absolute conception of the world. I joined others in expressing doubts about his views on the subject. These do not matter here. What matters is that I agree that philosophical analysis which points to such incongruities in our basic concepts opens the way to conceptual change. So there is no clear evidence here that my enterprise is any different from Williams’.

Very likely Williams recommends no conceptual revision in the quoted remark. He may simply mean that certain ways of framing the quest for explanation are unhelpful, and may lead the unwary to accept false assumptions about values. If the advice is addressed to the ways we express ourselves in ordinary, or most philosophical discussions of evaluative matters, including arguments about the value of this or that, then I completely agree. We do not often talk in these words about the existence or non-existence of values, nor is this to be regretted. My defence of discussing the dependence of value on practice in terms of existence conditions has to do with another way in which use of the term value in theoretical discussions deviates from its standard English meaning.⁵ The reason is that there we are interested in a broad category of evaluative properties, whose explanation has much in common, and there is no common term in English to cover all of them. Values are what those which possess the evaluative properties have in virtue of their possession. Their possession of value is what we are trying to explain, as well as the relation between the general possession of value and the specific nature of the properties which endow their possessors with value, that is, the relation between having value in general and being a value of a specific kind is part of the explanatory task.

Allowing that it is justified to use, in theoretical inquiries, 'value' in this partly stipulative broad sense, talk of the existence of values is both inevitable, and inevitably odd-sounding on many occasions. It sounds odd, for using a standard philosophical jargon I sometimes talk of the existence of values, etc., where normally we would talk, and that does not sound odd at all, of the question whether there are values, whether something is a real value (or really a value) etc. I have no desire to see the use of 'existence of values' locutions spread. Yet they are sometimes helpful in sharpening and in forcing distinctions in answers to the inevitable questions that I discuss. The question of the existence of values arises in ordinary, that is non-theoretical, discourse, as well as having a systematising role in theoretical discussions. The concept of value is such that claims such as "some people believe that piety is an important value, but in fact it is not a value all", "the belief that values are universal is false. There are no universal values", "not all reasons derive from values", whether true or false are meaningful, and import questions which in the standard philosophical jargon can be expressed by reference to the existence or otherwise of values.

Some would deny that in explaining claims such as those we need to refer to values. Korsgaard is among them. She believes 'that talk of the existence of values at this level is just misleading shorthand for something else, namely valuing, which is a thing that we do.' She is

⁵ I remarked on this in the lectures above.

right that often reference to values is best seen as a reference to what people do, or may, value. For example, "modesty is an old value, whereas independence is a new one", "Aztec culture was unique in having embraced so many false values", "middle-class values are very different from working-class values" are best understood to state that people have long valued modesty, whereas only relatively recently did they come to value independence, that the Aztecs valued many things which were of no value at all, and that in general people of the middle class value different things from working-class people. Yet, I think that she is wrong in thinking that such paraphrases apply everywhere and enable us to do away with the thought of values. This is so primarily because valuing can be right or wrong and it is right or wrong depending on whether what is valued possesses or fails to possess the value-property because of which it is valued, or at any rate some value-property in virtue of which its valuation is right, or in the absence of which it is wrong.

Observations such as the preceding one lead many to the view that discourse about values simply refers to evaluative properties, that is properties possession of which necessarily endows their possessors with some value.⁶ Discourse about beauty is about the property of being beautiful, etc. I think that every value correlates to a specific evaluative property. However, considerations of the temporal dimensions of value advanced in the lectures suggest that values cannot be identified with their corresponding properties, since properties do not have a temporal dimension. In other words, consideration of the existence of values is required not so much to explain locutions such as 'the value ... exists', but in order to explain the relations between values which govern and partly constitute genres, and the genres which they govern, which beyond doubt have a temporal dimension. This is but one of a range of considerations forcing on us recognition of the temporal dimension, and therefore (in order to make sense of it) recognition of the existence of values. Another consideration will be mentioned below, as it is relevant to the relationship between the social dependence of value advocated here, and social relativism.

Once a value comes into being it bears on everything without restriction

Pippin correctly remarks that

Our relativist will simply claim a stand-off on the most important issues. It does not follow, she would argue, that the failure of the social dependence thesis to warrant a relativist conclusion all by itself establishes anything about the autonomy or non-relativity of value claims.[\[REF\]](#)

⁶ There may be a case for broadening the category of evaluative properties beyond those captured by this characterisation. But for present purposes it will do.

It was not my aim to refute any version of evaluative relativism, and I presented no arguments at all against any version of relativism. I contrasted my view with a broad family of relativistic alternatives (never precisely characterised in the lectures) first to help the reader see that my view differs from theirs, and second to show how some of the reasons which prompt people to endorse versions of social relativism can be satisfied in an account which is not relativistic.

There is no simple summary of the way my view is not a relativistic one, if only because there are so many different versions of relativism, and my account diverges in different ways from different versions. Indeed, there is nothing to stop someone from defining a version of relativism of which my account is an instance. After all, I believe that values are - generally speaking, and subject to exceptions and modulations - dependent on social practices. I take that claim to be at the heart of social relativism. Perhaps the crux of the difference between my account and social relativism, in all its varieties, is that according to the view I explained in the lectures (1) four important types of value – pure sensual and perceptual pleasure, aesthetic value of natural phenomena, many enabling values, and the value of people and others who are of value in themselves – are at most indirectly dependent on social practices and (2) once a value comes into being it bears on everything without restriction.

That last sentence merits further explanation. As Williams points out I take a sustaining social practice to be ‘an emergence condition’ for the existence of a value, not ‘a continuation condition’. The reasons are many. Here is one, which I regard as particularly forceful.⁷ Many values are mixed values: The value of being a good opera consists in the way visuals, music, words and action, each with their own forms of excellence, combine. As explained in the lectures, we can think of a value as defined by, or constituted by a standard of excellence of a certain type.⁸ Since many values are mixed values, their standards of excellence refer to other values, and their required combination makes the values they define distinctive.⁹ They are distinct because whatever possesses this complex mixed value excels in a way other than simply by possessing the component values. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, that is, the value of the whole is greater than its value measured by the sum of the component good-making properties it possesses. The thought sounds complicated but is elementary: a good film is good in ways other than as a collection of good photos, a collection of funny episodes, etc. The way they combine determines its value as a film, which is different from its value as a collection of good shots, good jokes, etc. Hence, being a good film is a distinct good-making property corresponding to the value of films.¹⁰

The crucial step in the argument is that any combination of values can constitute a distinct value. That is that there are no combinatorial principles which dictate that only certain ways of combining values can be required by standards of excellence, and other combinations are ruled out: they cannot constitute distinct complex mixed values. If that is accepted, and I will not argue for it here, it follows that there could be as many values as possible combinations of values, that is an indefinite number. We know, however, that not all those possibilities represent real values, not every possible combination is a distinct value. For example, one can criticise an object, say a film, for having the right components but failing to integrate them well. Sometimes such criticism can be met by pointing out that it mistakes the genre the film belongs to: it would

⁷ I relied on it for the first time in 1991 in a paper which is now chapter eight of **Engaging Reason**.

⁸ I will discuss Korsgaard’s objection to this point below.

⁹ To avoid misunderstanding, or the kind of slippage that according to Korsgaard I am guilty of in the lectures, let me clarify that mixing values means possessing the respective value properties, and possessing them in the right relationship, as required by the values in question. Where the meaning is clear I spare the reader such complicating clarifications.

¹⁰ Notice that here, as elsewhere in the lectures and in this reply, I use examples loosely. I do not stop to consider whether ‘film’ designates a kind partly constituted by a distinctive form of excellence, or whether that is true of story-telling films, documentary films, etc. but there is no larger genre “film” marked by its own distinctive excellence.

be justified had this been a psychological drama, but it is a romantic comedy, and the elements are well integrated because they are related as they ought to be for a good romantic comedy.

If there were as many distinct values as possible combinations of values it would never be possible to criticise a film, or anything, for failing to integrate its elements well, for there would always be some other value which it exemplifies to a high degree.¹¹ But this is nonsense. We cannot refer to any possible way of relating component values as a value, only a subclass of combinations is. The social dependence thesis claims that only those which, at some point, were supported by a sustaining social practice are existing values, only they can justify actions, emotions, etc. in the ways that values can. Two factors combine to give sustaining social practices the role of emergence conditions, to borrow Williams' term. First, the crucial assumption I mentioned above was that there are no evaluative considerations which can determine which combinations of values are a distinct value. Social practices meet the bill for they are concrete facts, rather than evaluative considerations. Second, they make the contours of the value learnable and graspable by people, they concretise a standard of excellence making it available for people to learn and be guided by. Hence, the special social dependence thesis can explain how some possible standards of excellence, some possible combinations of values, are distinct values and others are not. It explains it in a way consistent with our conceptual practices, with the way in which we distinguish legitimate valuations and illegitimate ones.

Once a sustaining social practice comes into being, and the value emerges, there is no reason to think that it will not continue to exist if the practice dies out. It has been concretised through the practice, which can be learnt about and understood even after it no longer exists. Moreover, we do actually refer to such values, whereas we do not refer to pure possibilities as values.¹²

Grant, therefore, that cultural values, for they are the important type of value subject to the special social dependence thesis, depend on social practice for their emergence, but not for their continued existence. In what sense do they, once they exist, bear on everything without

¹¹ I am assuming, of course, that the value applies to the instance in question. Since these values will most likely be kind-based, this implies that the instance will be of the relevant kind. This assumption is based on the thought that items can be instances of a number of kinds, and that there could be different kind, differing only in what constitutes excellence in them, whose condition of membership of the kind is that the item be better if it belongs to that kind than if it belongs to any other. That means simply that it belongs to the kind if it excels by its standard more than by any other standard of excellence.

¹² This point has to be qualified to allow for the deliberate efforts of people to innovate and create new genres with their attendant values. I will not delineate the ways such innovative discourse differs from the invocation of existing old values. The differences should be familiar to the observant reader.

restriction, since that is meant to be an important difference between this view of social dependence and the standard social-relativistic view? The answer is in what has just been granted. To use Williams' terminology again, sustaining social practices constitute emergence conditions, and not - as they do according to standard social relativism - application or validity conditions.

Social relativism is not to be confused with the claim that cultural values are genre-based. Korsgaard asks whether buildings on Mars realise the values of classical architecture. They may possess the component properties which contribute to excellence in the classical style, such as symmetry, serenity and solidity. There is no problem in asking about any building whether it is serene, symmetrical or solid. The view that cultural values are broadly genre-dependent claims, however, that to possess the values of the classical architecture a building has to belong to the classical style. Membership of a genre, being an instance of the classical genre in this case, is determined in ways which may be (but need not be) independent of how it would excel by the standard of the style were it an instance of it. Only buildings in the classical style can excel in the classical virtues (allowing that buildings of other styles can be marginal cases of two styles, refer to other styles than their own, etc. etc.).¹³

Korsgaard seems to take this to show that my view is relativistic after all. That conflates genre-based evaluation with relativism. It is not common to think that those who rightly believe that only novels can be either good or bad novels are thereby committed to relativism. There is no reason to think that if all cultural values are genre-based the resulting account is relativistic in any significant way. Williams wonders whether the social dependence thesis implies that once the value emerges it can be applied to the evaluation of events which took place, or practices and institutions, etc. which existed before its emergence. The question is important, but complex and cannot be fully addressed here. The short, and dogmatically presented, answer is as follows:

- 1) Formally once a value has emerged it can apply to everything, without temporal restrictions. Many values are, however, genre specific. Only films can be judged as good or bad films, only parties as good or bad parties. Many values which are subject to the special dependence thesis cannot apply to anything which happened or existed before their emergence. The value of poetry emerges with poetry, the value of marriage with the institution of marriage, etc. Therefore there can be neither good nor bad poems, neither good nor bad marriages before the emergence of the values by which they are judged good or bad.

¹³ The explanation of the genre-dependence of many values is briefly repeated below.

- 2) There is an important exception to the generalisation about the non-existence of instances to which directly socially dependent values can apply before the emergence of the value. Not infrequently new values arise as a generalisation of more specific ones. The notion of a work of art or of literature is more recent than that of a painting or a sculpture, or of a play or a poem. Such new concepts emerge accompanied by new values, leading to a new understanding of the more concrete genres, and their values, to which they apply. Now a poem is an instance of literature, open to comparison with novels, and stories, and plays, to be judged as a work of literature. Such more general values do have instances which existed before they emerged. Those instances were hitherto regarded as belonging to previously existing genres and subject to evaluation by their standards. They still belong to these genres, but now they are also seen as subject to the more general standard of the more general genre. Here we come closest to a retrospective application of a value to the period before its emergence.
- 3) There is another kind of evaluation, one which does not depend on the existence of instances to the evaluation of which the value in question applies. It may be that the life of people was impoverished, that opportunities for having a fulfilling life were very limited, etc. because when they lived many values, or some specific ones had not yet emerged. We pass judgements of this kind regarding the existence or lack of opportunities to take advantage of valuable possible activities and life styles. We regret that some art forms, or some sports are available only to the rich. Judging a life to be impoverished or enriched by the absence or presence of valuable opportunities is indifferent as to whether their absence is due to the non-existence at the time of the values, or of good instances of them, or of opportunities to relate to them in the right way.¹⁴
- 4) Finally, there are of course various values which do not depend on sustaining social practices, and apply to any suitable object whenever it exists.

None of these observations quite meets Williams' point about 'not having any external moral comment to make' when thinking about the remoter past. He qualifies this remark by noting that it does not apply to all values, and that

¹⁴ Needless to say, such judgements presuppose that the value in light of which they are made is available, and applies, either because it falls under the observation above (point 2) or because it is not subject to the special dependence thesis at all.

it is at most an option. There is no logical or semantic rule which rules it out that I should condemn the High Middle Ages for not adequately respecting the principles of the First Amendment: it is simply not a very sensible thing to do.[\[REF\]](#)

I believe that I entirely agree with the sentiment here expressed. Where I feel less certain is whether we agree about the reasons for holding that it is simply not a very sensible thing to do. I am not sure what Williams' reasons are, and am not entirely sure that I understand my own. To be very brief about this let me just say that they seem to me to be a combination of conservative caution, and moral suspicion. The caution is due to a sense that we are all too likely to misunderstand people who live in circumstances very different from our own, and who believe in very different values, or at least in values which they articulate very differently from the way we articulate ours. It is all too easy to miss the meaning of activities, relationships or practices to people whose values we do not altogether share, too easy to dismiss them as worthless, too easy to fail to see the good in them, or to overlook that they display values we share in unfamiliar ways. The moral suspicion is of the need people may have to judge others, particularly when the object of the judgement is remote.

Values, genres and normativity

The general thesis of the lectures is that by their nature many values depend for their emergence on sustaining social practices, and that most others depend indirectly on social purposes for their existence; appreciation or opportunities to use them depend on such practices, or on values of the first kind. Furthermore, that the values successful engagement with which can give meaning to life are, directly or indirectly, socially dependent in these ways. If this is right then contingent facts affect which values exist and the forms they take. This raises various difficulties, and in the lectures I pointed to and tried to deal with only a few of them. One obvious problem is how is the threat of contradiction avoided. Given that opposing criteria of qualifying as good (say, as a good painting) are to be found, as when we commend one painting for its quietly harmonious character and another for its assertive dissonance, are we not committed to the view that one and the same painting is both good (for its quiet harmony) and bad (for lacking dissonance)? I pointed out that we avoid such contradictions because when we judge anything as good due to a value which is subject to the special dependence thesis we do so in stages. First, we identify a kind to which it belongs, a kind which by its nature or constitution is governed by a particular value, (i.e. by the standards of excellence for being good of that kind); and secondly, we judge the item under consideration good (or bad) to the extent that it is good (or bad) of its kind. This allows us to recognize the existence of values with apparently contradictory criteria.

Korsgaard is right to say that this account leaves many unanswered questions, though we are not always troubled by the same questions. She thinks that ‘there is the problem of the bad genre’, but I am not sure what the problem is. There would have been a problem had my claim been that every genre is a genre of some value or other. But I did not make such a claim. Rather, I argued that some values (those subject to the special dependence thesis) are genre-based.

Korsgaard also asks (regarding the wider genre to which classical architecture may belong) ‘What is the wider genre or genus in this case? Western architecture? Decorative architecture? How about “architecture”?’ [\[REF\]](#) This raises the question of the relations between genres and sub-genres. In the following comments, as in the lectures themselves, I will be concerned only with genres or kinds which are governed by distinct values. So, for example, to establish whether classical buildings belong to decorative architecture, western architecture or architecture we have to establish first whether the categories in question are evaluative (architecture – perhaps, western architecture - no, etc.), and then whether the buildings under consideration belong to those which are.

There is no reason to think that either all buildings in the classical style belong to another genre (say decorative architecture) or none do. Some may also be examples of decorative architectures while others may not. Some genres are, however, sub-genres of others, in the sense that necessarily any member of the sub-genre belongs to the genre. Necessarily all historical novels are novels, all comic operas are operas, etc. I assume that Korsgaard’s reference to wider genres is to the genres to which sub-genres refer. Her brief comments suggest the thought that the parent-genre provides means of assessing the relative value of instances belonging to different sub-genres. For example, think of two novels. One is a very good detective novel, the second merely a good bildungsroman. Korsgaard’s implicit suggestion is that the second may be better than the first if it is a better novel than the first, even though it ranks lower in terms of its sub-genre than the first in its sub-genre. That is not a necessary implication of the views I expressed in the lectures. The standard of excellence of a genre may simply determine that good instances of different sub-genres are good instances of the genre, without providing for their comparative ranking. It all depends on the nature of the genre and its standard of excellence. Nor is there any general reason to think that given any two items the one ranked highest in the ‘widest’, to use Korsgaard’s term, genre to which they both belong is the best. There may not be an overall ranking of their value. One may be better in one way, and the other in another way.

These points may help explain the radical pluralistic implications of my view, and the wide-ranging incommensurability of values which is its natural concomitant. But they do not take us to the heart of Korsgaard’s disagreement with my views. For me, comparing Korsgaard’s view

of values and normativity with my own is tantalizingly elusive.¹⁵ There seems to be much that we agree on. But important disagreements remain. I said that values have no point except to be enjoyed or engaged with by valuers, and that there can be no meaning to the life of valuers, and no point in being a valuer except through the enjoyment of and engagement with values. I also suggested that our grasp of the concepts of value and valuers is interdependent, that we cannot fully grasp the one without the other. There are other, closely related, theses about the interdependence of values and valuers. Korsgaard regards this view of the reciprocity and interdependence of valuers and values as unsatisfactory. It leaves my “theory chasing its own tail”, she says.[\[REF\]](#) Somehow valuers, people, have the priority in that they are the sources of normativity, and they endow values with normativity. Her view of the priority of valuers is corroborated by an understanding of values which is, in spite of superficial similarities, very different from mine. Let me start with that difference.

¹⁵ This is partly because Korsgaard poses the questions to be explored in terms which makes sense only if her, or more broadly a constructivist, explanation of normativity is correct. For example, her central question is about the sources of normativity. I do not think that normativity has sources, or rather the metaphor (normativity flowing from its sources) does mischief, and does not help. It is possible to say that my promise is the source of my obligation to do as I promised, or that Congress is the source of our (legal and therefore, in the circumstances, also moral) obligation to pay income tax. But it does not make sense to talk of the source of normativity in general, any more than it makes sense to talk of the sources of properties, or the sources of objects.

I therefore find her analogy of values (on my view) and people misleading. People are not the sources of their own rights, nor of other people’s duties towards them (voluntary and legal obligations like promises excepted) any more than great paintings are the sources of the duty to respect them. To be sure we would not have such a duty if the paintings did not exist, etc., but there is nothing gained from calling them sources of the duties, and doing so invites confusion. I do not believe, as Korsgaard thinks that I do, that values are sources of normative claims. That an object (or event or institution, etc.) possesses an evaluative property makes the proposition that it does true. But that does not make the value a source of any claim any more than the fact that my car has stalled is the source of a claim to that effect.

If, however, constructivism is correct then normative claims are not like other statements. Other statements that some things have a certain property or stand in a certain relationship are true if they possess the property or stand in the relationship, but normative claims are made true not by things being as they say they are but by the fact that there are valid sources for them, whatever they may be. In attributing to me views about the sources of normative claims Korsgaard overlooks the fact that talk of ‘sources of normativity’ has a proper role only within a constructivist approach, and should be introduced only after the validity of that approach has been established.

Commenting on my remark that the very idea of opera, friendship, or the state is a normative idea in that we understand the concept of an opera or 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, Korsgaard points out that if Plato or Aristotle were right then the same is true of all objects. Perhaps, though I doubt it. I doubt it because I doubt that they had a use for the concept of value which we have today, given that their notion of perfection was bound up with the thought that all objects have a natural tendency to seek their own perfection.¹⁶ Given that I am no expert on the topic it is lucky for me that we do not have to pursue it, since Plato and Aristotle were wrong, and so, it seems to me, is Korsgaard. It is not the case that "we understand any kind of thing by understanding what a good or well-functioning thing of its kind is".[\[REF\]](#) The simple reason is that regarding many kinds of things it does not make sense to ask what is a good or well-functioning thing of that kind. There are no good or well-functioning stones, or pebbles, or streams, or hail, or snow, or mountains, or stars, or black holes, or electrons, or photons, etc.

As Korsgaard remarks "this may make you feel that we have got derailed somewhere."[\[REF\]](#) And indeed it does, and, I believe, we have. It shows that Korsgaard is not really thinking about values at all, and that has far-reaching consequences for the rest of her argument. Of course, hers is not a simple mistake. It is a considered response to a problem. I will try to explain how she is led to her view in stages.

First, some ground clearing. Korsgaard not only attributes to me, but accepts herself the identity of values with the standards which are constitutive of kinds such that it makes sense to say that there are better or worse instances of that kind, kinds like assassins, chairs, oak trees, and rhododendrons. She also thinks that all kinds are of this type. I have commented on that second claim above, so let us turn to the first.

¹⁶ Perhaps because Korsgaard overlooks this point she attributes to me the view that the function of opera is to be a good opera. I doubt that opera has a function, (though different operas may have had different functions at different times). If it has a function it is not to be an opera, nor to be a good opera. I am not at all sure what these expressions can mean. Nor, I have to admit, do I understand what is meant by "standards entirely unique" to a particular object, or of an object "being perfect of its kind, where its kind is given just by itself". Perhaps I should add that it is not my view that appreciating sunsets is a social practice. It seems to be some sort of mental activity, or an ability to engage in such activity. However, I do believe that to appreciate the beauty of a sunset in the ways we do does presuppose various beliefs (e.g. such as exclude the thought that sunsets are signs of the end of the world) and a range of attitudes to nature whose availability depends on one's familiarity with socially acceptable attitudes to nature, knowledge of aesthetic values, and experience of the ways sunsets featured in culture, their symbolic significance, their portrayal in the arts and literature, their role in romantic love, etc. This does not mean that only experts in all of the above can enjoy sunsets. It merely means that how one enjoys a sunset, how a sunset strikes one intuitively and instantly, depends on one's knowledge and experience of such matters.

As I argued in the lectures, where X is a kind which is governed by an intrinsic value (i.e. partly constituted by the standards of excellence of that value)¹⁷ we can move from something being a good X to it being good or of value (a good object, etc. or one of value, etc.) *simpliciter*. A good assassin, as Korsgaard is, of course, aware, is not in virtue of being an assassin a good person, or good or of value, nor is a good hydrangea valuable or of value because it is a good hydrangea. Admittedly all such objects may on occasion be of instrumental value, and some of them – i.e. useful artefacts – are normally of instrumental value. Only normally, for the uses for which they were created may cease to exist. Instrumental goods are only contingently so and therefore instances of species which are good if they are instrumental goods are only contingently good or of value. Furthermore¹⁸, that something is good or of value entails that there is reason to respect it (e.g. not to damage it), as well as reason to engage with it in the way appropriate to its value (enjoy looking at it if it is a painting, or listening to it if a piece of music, etc.). The two points (if it is a good X then it is of value, if it is of value there is reason to respect it, and reason to engage with it, or enjoy it) mark the difference between values, even those which are genre based, and kinds constituted in part by standards of excellence in the kind. Not all such kinds satisfy the two conditions, and therefore, not all of them represent values.

In a way Korsgaard agrees with these points. At least, she agrees that there is no reason to do anything just because it is a good instance of a kind constituted in part by a standard of excellence in the kind. The difficulty is that she tends to think of values as constituted by such intrinsic standards of excellence of any standard-constituted kind. Hence *her* ‘values’ are not normative – there is no reason to care about them, or to behave in any special way regarding them. Again, I agree with her on that but take it to show that being good of a kind is in itself not being of value, and the relevant kind-constituting standards are not necessarily standards which constitute distinct values or any values at all. For I take values to be inherently normative. And it seems that Korsgaard does not. She says that

‘you have reason to care about the values internal to a thing, or perhaps even have to care about those values, when the thing is in a certain way yours.’ [\[REF\]](#)

Later she explains that we have to care about our health because it is physical excellence and we have a physical nature, and we have to care about cultural excellence because we have a cultural nature. So where do we disagree? First, as already stated, I believe that values are inherently

¹⁷ I will leave out of consideration here things, persons, etc., which are of value in themselves. See on that topic Chapter Four of my **Value, Respect And Attachment** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ A point developed in **Value, Respect And Attachment**.

normative, i.e. that possessing evaluative properties is inherently related to reasons: we have reasons to pursue actions which possess evaluative properties. Korsgaard treats values as if they are not inherently normative. Second, I believe that if Korsgaard thinks that having reasons is having reasons to care then she overstates the weight of reasons, and mischaracterizes them. Third, I do not share her view that we have reasons to care for what is ours, and only for that.

The first point, that values are inherently normative, seems to be a simple and generally known fact about them. While Korsgaard seems to dissent from it, she also seems to think that we should only care for what is of value, and that seems to suggest an intrinsic connection between value and normativity whose nature, in her view, is not clear to me.

The second point is of some importance. I believe that reasonable belief that an action possesses an evaluative property makes its performance intelligible, and if it does possess such a property then, other things being equal, its performance is justified. In other words, I am among those who believe that possession of a value-property (i.e. the property corresponding to a value, in the way that being beautiful correspond to the value of beauty) constitutes a presumptively sufficient reason for an action. That does not mean that we have reason to care for everything of value. I agree with Korsgaard that the fact that good Ming pots are beautiful (i.e. of value in that way) does not mean that I have reason to care about Ming pots (I will explain this below). That is consistent with the belief that the intrinsic value of actions (a) provides reason to do them, whether or not we care about them, and whether or not we have a *special* reason to care about them; and (b) our views about the intrinsic value of actions makes it intelligible that we care about what we care about, as well as featuring in the justification of our caring about it, when the caring is justified.

To clarify: Caring about an action, or a relationship or pursuit, is more than doing it, or engaging with it. It involves a certain attitude towards it, and it involves letting concern for it play a relatively important role in one's life which includes prioritising it relative to other matters one has reason for, but which one does not care about (what one must or must not do excluded). Hence while, by the nature of value and of reason, the value of what we care about is a presumptively sufficient reason to engage in it, it is not necessarily a presumptively sufficient reason to care about it. That is consistent with it being a reason for caring about it, in the sense of necessarily being part of the case for caring about it.¹⁹

¹⁹ By 'special reasons' for caring above I meant presumptively sufficient reasons. I wanted to emphasise the fact that the value of what we care about is a reason for action (and for appropriate attitudes) even though it is not a (presumptively sufficient) reason for caring about anything.

There are cases where we must do things we do not care about. Possibly, in all such cases we should care about them. But caring about them is not a condition without which we have no reason to do them. Furthermore, there are many mundane things we do almost every day simply because they are sensible things to do in the circumstances, even though it would be wrong to say that they connect to anything we care about. At the moment, for example, I sit in a waiting room, waiting for my appointment. I hear the applause of the crowd from a TV in an adjoining room, and realizing that people there must be watching Wimbledon's men's singles finals I go there to watch. I do not care about the match or about its result, nor do I care about watching it, or about anything else connected with my action. I am not bored (I could carry on writing this reply), nor have I any other instrumental reason to watch the match. It is simply an (intrinsically) good thing to do, since it is enjoyable. That is an example of how the intrinsic value of things furnishes reasons for action, independently of what we care about and of what we have *special*, i.e. presumptively sufficient, reason to care about.

Turning to caring: We need not care about everything of value. But we should not care about things of no value. The value of what we care about gives us reason to care, making our caring intelligible to ourselves and to others, and contributing to its justification when it is justified. Hence intelligible caring presupposes the existence values, and an account of reasons for caring cannot make an account of values redundant. So far for the second point of possible difference between Korsgaard and me. I do not think that we help ourselves by trying to explain normativity or the role of value by reference to caring and the reasons for it. Reasons for caring are rather special reasons, relating to the role matters can play in our life as a whole. We can explain them by reference to reasons generally, but not the other way round and we cannot rely on them to capture the way in which all values are normative.

Coming finally to the third point, for Korsgaard having a cultural nature means being collectively, as a species, capable of developing a variety of ways of life, and having the need or the drive to do so. I agree with Korsgaard that there is no point to cultural values unless there are valuers with a cultural nature. I also agree with her that in engaging in cultural activities we should choose good ones rather than bad ones. What determines what are valuable cultural activities and what not? Cultural values. What determines that something is a cultural value, rather than what Korsgaard calls "a bad value"?

This is not a problem about pluralism. Korsgaard welcomes the existence of a plurality of cultural values. She says

Could the architectural values grounded in human nature, the values of architecture as such, determine a single absolutely best or right form of, say, dwelling? I do not suppose

that any of us will find this particular possibility tempting. This is in part because among the things that human beings in fact appreciate in architecture is variety, it is in part because human nature is essentially exploratory.[\[REF\]](#)

It is a puzzle about whether the general nature of culture as a way of life such that people can have various ways of life, and a taste for them, can provide sufficient criteria for the determination of good and bad cultural values. The subject, the fact that we can ask critical questions of ourselves, etc., cannot provide the answers to the questions we ask. Nor can our taste for variety, and our exploratory nature do that. They are as responsible for values as for what she calls “bad values”. It all rests on the internal standard of culture, which we should care about because we have a cultural nature. That is where I find difficulty in following Korsgaard’s reasoning. I do not understand what is the internal standard of culture, and how it determines which novels, paintings, buildings, operas, string quartets, are good.

How are such matters determined on my view? Here is one way one may be led to Korsgaard’s position by criticising mine: I agree to the obvious, i.e. that there are kinds partly constituted by standards of excellence for members of the kind which are not standards of value. I protest that while on my account cultural values are kind-based, not all kinds are kinds of value. Some are kinds of ‘bads’ and some are indifferent in value. Korsgaard turns to human nature to provide the reasons for caring about certain of these kinds, and therefore about their internal standards, thus providing a test by which we can tell which of them are inherently good, inherently bad, or neither. I availed myself of the distinction but said nothing about how it is determined. We can agree that only if a kind is a kind of value does it follow that if an item is good of that kind it is, *pro tanto*, good. We can agree that if it is good there is reason to engage in it and reason to respect it. These may be so-called formal features of value. They do nothing to tell us what is of value. Korsgaard, whatever the difficulties with her account, at least tries.

I fear that that charge misses the point of my claim that there is mutual dependence between values and valuers and between the concepts of them. It is not so much that my ‘theory chases its own tail’ as that it denies that between these two one is head and the other tail. As I see it, the search for heads is a search for non-existing shortcuts, a search for secure foundations, secure tests, which enable us to determine what is value. All value flows from one source, and all we have to do is get to the source and follow the trail. I am not saying that Korsgaard is committed to a foundationalist, linear, view of the process. But I think that the feeling that her, as yet unfulfilled, project of accounting for value and normativity is holding a promise which mine (as yet full of gaps, etc.) does not is due to a yearning for the certainties of foundationalism, and of a linear direction of argument from a single source. Wish that it were possible, I may say. For I

believe that it is not and we need to employ all the evaluative/normative concepts at our disposal, and resort to many of their essential properties, to understand and establish the nature of any of them, and to establish the nature of what is good or bad. We need to understand the nature of value to understand who can be a valuer, and the nature of valuers to understand what are values, and what can be of value. To establish which kind-constituting standard is the standard of a value, and which is not we need to deploy arguments which use evaluative premises to establish that the standard is one of a distinct value or that it is not. There is no way to do so without presupposing some value judgements, no test of what are values, or what is valuable which starts with nothing, with no beliefs about values.²⁰ I said a little about the reasons for that in the lectures, though the argument there is very incomplete.

Perhaps I should add a word about health, given its importance in Korsgaard's comment. At the start of the lectures, to illustrate the significance of the fact that they are only about intrinsic values, I said:

‘the value of the means of personal survival, such as food, shelter, good health, is merely instrumental’, adding in a footnote: ‘That is qua means of survival their value is merely instrumental. Those same things may also have value for other reasons’.[\[REF\]](#)

Korsgaard is quite right to insist that health is not merely a means of longevity. It is the means for or a necessary precondition of being able to engage in many valuable pursuits during our life, however short it may be. She is right that longevity is not a goal in itself, not without the ability to and the prospect of engaging in worthwhile activities. She is also right in saying that we are often rather reckless in our attribution of ‘mere instrumental’ value to things, and I am no exception. I do not share her doubts about the cogency of the notion, or of the explanation of it given at the beginning of the lectures. I feel that her doubts stem in part from the fact that, when discussing values, she does not have values in mind, but rather kinds constituted by standards and the way instances of them measure up in terms of those standards. But I do agree that we are often careless in failing to distinguish between a thing having instrumental value and it being a precondition of something of value, etc. Health may be a case in point.

But these are incidental to the main issue in contention between us. Health is one of the conditions enabling us to function well and maximising our options. The more impaired our health the less able are we to function well, and the fewer are our options. It is in this regard like

²⁰ And of course in this regard evaluative beliefs are like beliefs about material objects and their properties, and like beliefs about psychological properties, etc. There is no test for what there is in ‘the material world’. We reason from some beliefs about which material objects there are and what properties they have others, etc.

having all one's limbs, or having skills, or having money. It differs from them, as it is associated with sensations of physical well being which are intrinsically valuable. As a condition of our ability and of many of our options it is a condition of both good and ill. It enables us to pursue valuable options, but also to pursue base and evil ones. It is not itself valuable except through its association with the sensations of well being, and in as much as it happens to be part of some cultural goal, comparable to body-building. These cases apart, its value depends on the use made of it. It is therefore no more than instrumentally valuable, and valuable as a condition of valuable options and abilities.

Korsgaard thinks that it is intrinsically valuable because (a) it is the intrinsic excellence of our physical nature, and (b) our physical nature is ours and we therefore have reason to care about it. I believe that we have reason to foster our health only in as much as we have valuable and realistic goals and pursuits for which it is a precondition. The issue is not who is right about the explanation of the value of health, but who is right about the sorts of consideration which determine its value. The considerations I adduced are of a familiar type, which we rely on commonly. They apply, not in the details of their content, but in their form, to the value of education, of rest, and much else. I do not suppose that Korsgaard would wish to deny that, whether or not her own argument is sound, they are cogent considerations, and that, whatever else can be said about health, the conclusions they point to are sound as well. But what else can be said about health? Is Korsgaard right that it matters just because we have a physical nature regardless of how that nature relates to our goals and ambitions for our life, that it matters independently of whether we have or should have any goals and ambitions for our life, independently of whether our life has value of any kind at all? I do not think that what she says commits her to such a view. But if the value of health is conditional on the value of our life, and on the nature of the goals and ambitions we have or should have for our life, then is it not the case that its value is the value of a condition which makes that life, and the realisation of those goals and ambitions possible?

Pluralism and liberalism

Given that buildings have a general function in human life, they must meet certain universal normative standards, standards that enable them to serve those functions, and the result will be universal architectural values. And those values might *conceivably* determine that one genre is better than another. [\[REF\]](#)

In passages like these Korsgaard appears to think that I claimed that it is necessary that there are many distinct architectural values. In fact I agree with her that it is not necessary that there be such a plurality. It is essential to my position that whether there are any cultural values, and which cultural values exist are contingent matters. Korsgaard seems to acknowledge that the

genus-based account of some values contributes to establishing the possibility of value pluralism. Of course, once the possibility of value pluralism is acknowledged then, given the account of values I advanced, it is a relatively trivial matter to establish that value pluralism is with us. As the comments on the lectures illustrate, what concerns most commentators on value pluralism is not the pluralism of cultural values, the plurality of intrinsically valuable forms of interpersonal-relations, of ways of life, or of forms of excellence in the arts, and the like. Their concern is with the plurality of so-called moral values, and of political forms of organisation, topics on which I said nothing in the lectures.²¹

Remarking on my view that values come into being at a particular time, and applying it to liberal values²², Williams asks

what, on his [i.e. my] view, does that mean for our evaluations of the world before that time? We may recall that ... Raz said that once a value comes into being “it bears on everything”. ... I take it that Raz means that we can apply the value to states of the world before that value existed. It is of course true that we can say evaluative things about earlier societies, and some of them are more sensible than others ... But the present question is more particular: whether on Raz’s view the specific values of liberal democracy apply to or “bear on” earlier societies, such as those of the Middle Ages or the ancient world. ... What are we supposed to say about these people? It can hardly have been a cognitive failure of theirs, not to recognise a value which did not yet exist. ... Was it a failing of theirs *in terms of that very value* not to have brought that value into existence? Was it a failing of theirs at all that their practices did not accord with these values, as it is a failing in some contemporary societies? Was it even a deficiency of their societies, if it was not yet historically possible for a society to embody these values? If it was not a failing or deficiency of any kind, what is it for the values to apply to them? ...

There are also real interpretational and ethical questions: how far is it pointful and helpful to discuss earlier states of the world in terms of our more local values? How local are our values? Certainly, as I have said, there is nothing in the nature of the universe or of language to stop one applying one’s values in this way. As I have put it in another connection, you can be Kant at the Court of King Arthur if you want to. The question is the extent to which it is reasonable and helpful to do so, or rather gets in the way of understanding; in particular, of understanding how we differ from the past, and hence who we are. [\[REF\]](#)

21 This preoccupation with political values explains, I suspect, Pippin’s comment that value pluralism ‘is a distinct product of the liberal, democratic, Western, humanistic tradition - and foreign to many others, we most certainly do believe it is superior to jingoistic nationalism, the ways of the Taliban, the attacks by Chinese authorities on Falun Gong and so forth.’ Williams has replied to this contention. Let me just add that what we believe in and the jingoistic nationalists deny is not value pluralism, as explained in the lectures (a view which is far from commanding universal agreement among ‘us’) but the value of some practices, and the value of tolerating them even if they are mistaken. One need not believe in value pluralism to condemn this kind of jingoistic nationalism, and its repressive practices.

22 I did not in the lectures, and will not here, address the question what if any are these values. I have discussed these matters elsewhere. Here I only wish to comment on the connection between contemporary liberal thought and the account in my lectures.

I have already expressed my agreement with the sentiments expressed in the last paragraph. But I do not think that the social dependence thesis does much to help deal with the question posed by Williams in the first paragraph and that is for the very reason he mentions, that is, once a value exists it applies to everything, including to things which took place before it existed. If liberal values do not apply to the Court of King Arthur this is because they do not apply universally. To be short, though crude, about it I would say that they apply only to advanced capitalist societies. To function well political arrangements, their institutions and principles alike, have to be suited to the social, cultural and economic conditions of the societies they govern. Otherwise they are liable to cause more harm than good. Liberal principles and institutional arrangements would have been as counter-productive as they are unimaginable in the Middle Ages. To come to this conclusion no assumption about the time they came into being is needed. The conditions which limit the application of certain principles to appropriate conditions apply, of course, to existing principles.

This is not to say that the repression of gays, or racial discrimination, or female circumcision were ever other than morally abhorrent, but it is typical that we tend to regard values or principles whose application is not restricted to favourable social, cultural or economic conditions as moral rather than political. Be that as it may, without going into detailed examination of this principle or that value, all one can say is that by and large my thesis about the temporal and contingent element in values parallels and chimes in its practical implications with the fact that political principles and institutions are contingently suitable to specific conditions of human societies.²³ It is not, however, the basis for such conclusions.

All this is in principle consistent with thinking that liberal principles and institutions, or any others, are superior to all rival political principles and institutions. It is possible to hold that, and therefore maintain that if they can bear their beneficial fruits only under certain conditions it is important to bring about those conditions, etc. But, 'I find this very hard to believe', to quote Williams, and for the very reasons he gives in his comment:

²³ That the suitability of political arrangements is determined by other social factors does not deny, of course, that existing political arrangements have a deep influence on other aspects of social life. I do not hold the view that political principles and values are some sort of 'superstructure', made suitable by some 'base', without having causal effects on the character of the existing 'base'.

The peculiarity of human beings is their capacity and need to live under culture, and I do not see how it could be that this capacity and need, properly understood, will reveal that human beings are really “meant to” to live under one fairly specific form of culture, that of liberal modernity.²⁴ [REF]

Pippin was alone among the commentators in remarking on my contention regarding interpretation and under-determination. Among other things he observes that

Both defenders and opponents of affirmative action may be responding to a general underdetermination in the way our social practices sustain the value of, guide interpretations of, rights protection, or fair social entitlement, a value they both agree on. But the fact that they agree on the absolute value of rights protection is largely irrelevant when compared with the depth of their disagreement, and the unavoidability of some decision. Our suspicion that reason is incapable of ever resolving the dispute in favor of one side or the other (that the matter is therefore essentially a political contestation, a struggle for power) remains a genuine anxiety. [REF]

I may not have put the matter in precisely these terms, but essentially we agree here. I share Pippin’s awareness of the limits of reason, and one of the aims of establishing its power and credentials is to establish where its writ does not run. I do not share his apprehension of loss of faith in philosophy given its inability to solve disputes such as the one he alludes to above. I do not think that philosophy has all that much to contribute to the solution of such disputes. It is a fallacy, encouraged by some of the most successful recent writers in political philosophy, that philosophy can out of its own resources do much to solve deep social divisions and social problems.

But nor do I believe that that means that appeal to values, principles, and reasoned arguments has nothing to do with these disputes. On the contrary, the disputes cannot take place in anything like the form they do but for their appeal to values and principles. The very under-determined rights, principles and values, which fail to resolve the disputes, frame them, define their terms, and the nature of the aspirations of the rival parties. Nor is the fact that the issues are under-determined by values show that the disputes are no more than a naked power struggle, and the appeal to reasons a mere self-serving rationalisation. It is true that the parties are rarely clear about the philosophical presuppositions of their claims, but that is not unique to disputes where

²⁴ Williams adds: ‘Underlying this is a more general issue of principle. If there is such a thing as an essential nature of human beings, there is only one way in which it can rule anything out – by making it impossible. If it has failed to rule it out in that way, it cannot try to catch up by sending normative signals’. [REF] This is, however, less clear if one accepts the possibility that there are normative aspects of human nature. This would make it possible for some essential human features to send ‘the normative signals’ by which other matters may be judged. Like him I do not think that this is much help in singling out preferred forms of culture. The one qualification I would enter is that human nature may mark some matters, like susceptibility to pain and its potential consequences, or the importance of sex to human

reason under-determines the issue. What matters is that the rival parties advance ideals, representing different ways in which values can be implemented, or developed. They appeal to the public's imagination, trying to convince it to opt for their vision and against its rivals. It is not a process with a unique rational outcome. But it is not one where values and reasons play no role.

We can compare it to two friends debating the relative merits of two films, neither of which is better than the other, but where each friend strongly likes one and dislikes the other. (It is perfectly alright not to like things of value, provided one is not basing the dislike on false beliefs). They like what they like for good reasons (let us assume) and they try to show the other how attractive is their favourite film by invoking those reasons. That is one way in which people come to develop a taste for one style or another, in films, clothes, friendship and much else. Not because it is rationally superior to others, but because it appeals to one, hopefully for good reasons, more than alternatives which have no lesser reasons in their favour. Our responses to rival political ideals or policies are often similar. That is, often there are reasons for both ideals and neither is better than the other. Some of us will be attracted to one of the ideals, while others are attracted to their rivals. We try to make others share our taste by presenting the ideals or policies to them in ways which display their attractions, make them more visible, more palpable to those who as yet do not share our preferences.

In the lectures I highlighted a somewhat different, though related, manifestation of underdetermination by reason. Such underdetermination, I said, often manifests itself in the fact that there are rival interpretations of *common* ideals none of which are superior to the others. Different interpretations would support somewhat different courses of action, somewhat different institutional arrangements, etc. But neither can be said to be the best. In such cases, it is evident that reason plays a crucial role in the political advocacy of the rival camps, for their views, being interpretations of common ideals, cannot even be understood except by understanding the values which underlie these ideals, and the way they play their role in the different interpretations of them.

It is important that we should not exaggerate what we can establish by force of reason, and that we should realise that one crucial test of a satisfactory constitution is that it allows channels for causes to be promoted for good decisive reasons, and another is that it allows channels for causes to be promoted, and for reasonable distributive decisions to be made, because

experience, which do send normative signals as to the fact that some aspects of cultures are repressive. These enable us to condemn some aspects of all human societies known to us.

they represent people's preferences which though based on reasons are not superior to some alternatives which they could have opted for, and that others in the population prefer.