

## OBJECTIVITY AND FORMS OF LIFE

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A Commentary On:

Martha Nussbaum: Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach

in Quality of Life, edited by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993). (Proceedings of conference sponsored by WIDER, Helsinki 1988).

Does appeal to forms of life underwrite or undermine claims to objectivity? The question arises in various contexts and forms. The forms of life appealed to may be linguistic or other practices, or aspects of experience or thought. Objectivity may seem threatened in various ways: by relativism, given the variety of forms of life; by idealism, if a claim about the way things are is made to depend on forms of life that are ultimately down to us, not the world; by verificationism, if it is suggested that necessary conditions for our practices of determining something to be true are necessary conditions of its *being* true. On the other hand, some, such as Wittgenstein, have thought that the appeal to practices keeps such threats from arising, by engaging one's mind immediately with the world and other minds: if we are able to do certain things well, together, there is no further real issue as to how our private intentions can ever match up. Martha Nussbaum's paper considers whether appeal to the varying forms of life that ground talk of specific virtues tends to support relativism, and argues that it does not. She sketches forms of life that are distinctive of human beings, hedged as we are in some sense between the gods and the beasts. In contrast with the gods, we have essentially in common certain basic reference-fixing experiences of the conditions of limited, mortal human (as opposed to godlike) life, which allows us to address the same question – how should one act with respect to *that* sort of situation? – even though we may disagree about the best answer. In contrast with the beasts, we also have essentially in common certain distinctive capacities, for sociality and practical reason, our valued exercises of which may be appealed to in the course of ethical disagreement. Correctly understood,

she argues, the rule of these specific and distinctively human forms of life in ethics, and in Aristotelian ethics in particular, does not support relativism and does support objectivism.

I am in substantial accord with her conclusion, and indeed have myself offered different arguments for related conclusions, which I will not repeat here.<sup>1</sup> Her responses to the first objection she considers to her position, concerning singleness of solution, seem to me correct. The second objection she considers concerns the lack of culturally neutral, uninterpreted common starting points in experience or practice; while I have certain reservations about her formulation of a response to the objection in terms of different conceptual schemes, I shall pass over those issues here. What I will focus on are certain issues arising out of suggestions she makes in responding to the third objection, concerning the possibility of human life that simply lacks certain forms of life altogether. These issues concern another way in which arguments that appeal to forms of life may seem to undermine claims to objectivity.

Nussbaum suggests that a particular kind of self-validating argument is available in discussions of the value to be placed on certain of the features of our common humanity that she lists, such as sociality and practical reason. This is a kind of argument that gets its force not from any logical inconsistency in the position it argues against, but rather from a pragmatic inconsistency: some aspect of the form of life, the activity, practice, or mentality, of the sceptic has implications inconsistent with the content of his view. As we shall see below, such pragmatic inconsistencies often play a role in transcendental arguments – arguments concerning how certain forms of life are possible, what the necessary conditions for them are. Nussbaum suggests an example of what I am calling pragmatic inconsistency: the sceptic's very participation in discussion of the value of practical reason in the course of expressing his sceptical view about it in some sense affirms its value, and so is at odds with the sceptical content of his view. She further suggests that there may be cases in which the essential properties as a human being of the person holding a sceptical view would be negated by the living out of that view, so that such a life – say, the life of a god, or of a beast – could not be a life for that person.

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1. See my *Natural Reasons* (1989), esp. Part I.

I want to consider two questions about these suggestions. (1) What is the significance with respect to issues about objectivity of the fact that certain expressions of some propositions presuppose other inconsistent propositions? (2) How is our capacity for self-determination related to the way in which we may be constrained in the evaluative views we can defend by what we essentially are as human beings, our essential limitations and aspirations?

The first question arises in the debate about whether transcendental arguments undermine objectivity. They may seem to involve some kind of idealism or relativism or verificationism, by deriving conclusions about the world and/or other possible minds from features of our forms of life so cutting the world and/or other minds down to the size of our minds.<sup>2</sup> Ross Harrison has offered a rebuttal of the view that transcendental arguments must involve idealism. He points out that such arguments are of the valid inferential form:  $p$ , necessarily if  $p$  then  $q$ , therefore  $q$ . The minor premiss  $p$  is often established pragmatically, by immersion in certain forms of life: experience, language, thought. Various celebrated if problematic arguments, which are not my focus here, support the conditional premisses of such inferences: arguments of experience, language, content, thought. But we should notice, Harrison says, that for such inferences to be valid the minor premiss ' $p$ ' need not be necessary. There might not, for example, have been any minds, or any language, at all. Far from being mind-dependent, the world might have been mindless, hence not the object of judgement or thought at all. Such an admission is hardly idealist in implication, nor does it tend to undermine a view of the world as objective.

While there is clearly something right about it, Harrison's argument does not seem to go to the heart of the intuition that transcendental arguments somehow tend to undermine objectivity. To this end, we should distinguish between two ways in which the minor premiss of a transcendental argument gets established, even if not established as necessary. This is the premiss for which support may be pragmatic, conceded by something the sceptic does or is, his form of life. Such pragmatic support can take at least two forms. It can be either presuppositional, or demonstrative.

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2. See Nagel (1986: ch. 6); Williams (1981).

*Presuppositional* support derives from our presupposing that  $p$  in many of our activities and from the fact that forgoing such activities would be terribly costly. Consider, for example, the argument that the contents of the reactive attitudes presupposed by many of our relationships and practices imply, under certain conditions, blame and guilt, and that such attitudes, presupposed as they are in many of our valued ways of living, would be terribly costly to forgo. We have no good reason to forgo them, when we consider what the consequences would be in terms of the impoverishment of our lives.<sup>3</sup> Consider also the argument, suggested by Nussbaum, that participation in philosophical discussion of the value of practical reason presupposes that there is reason to go in for such discussion, which implies the value of practical reason. Or the argument put forward by Putnam that successful reference by someone to vats in asserting that he might be a brain in a vat presupposes that he is in the right sort of causal connection with vats – not, that is, merely a generic causal connection to artificial skull – in which case he is not a brain in a vat.<sup>4</sup>

Harrison's point, applied to such arguments would be that there is no necessity that we go in for reactive attitudes, or for philosophical discussion of the value of practical reason; nor does any necessity attach to reference to vats. We could simply cut ourselves off from other people, refrain from deliberation, or language, or thought about vats, and nothing would be presupposed; in some cases, the price of pragmatically consistent scepticism is silence, isolation, perhaps even denaturing ourselves, and it may very well not be worth paying, but nevertheless we could pay it. If we were to, nothing could be demonstrated about blame, or the value of practical reason, or whether we brains in vats. (Nussbaum seems to agree on this when she stresses, in another paper, that there is no hard external obstacle, only internal appeal to what we already value, to block certain sceptical views.<sup>5</sup>)

But it seems to me that this point is not enough to keep the threat to objectivity at bay. The worry that persists can be expressed thus: there is a problem about the relationship between the form of life and the truth of the proposition it presupposes. How can [something missing in original article] whether we choose to pay the terrible costs of

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3. See Strawson (1974).

4. Putnam (1979, 1981).

5. Nussbaum (forthcoming).

forgoing our presuppositions tell us anything about whether the sceptic is wrong? Surely, the objectivist will say, whether he is wrong cannot depend on what forms of life we go in for and hence on what we presuppose; such dependence would itself undermine objectivity. Of course, our withholding our presuppositions does not make the sceptic right; but how can we regard our presuppositions as making him wrong, without giving up objectivity? An objective world is not obliged to conform to our presuppositions. As Stroud points out with respect to conditional necessities to the effect that 'such-and-such is necessary if we are to think and speak as we now do', no theoretical justification is thereby given of our acceptance of the propositions at issue since we could give up our present ways of thinking and speaking and adopt others – however unattractive a prospect that might be.<sup>6</sup>

This leads me to the second, stronger kind of pragmatic support for the minor premiss '*p*' – *demonstrative support*. Perhaps it is only really here that transcendental arguments completely avoid the threat to objectivity. If so, it would be important to distinguish weaker, presuppositional varieties of transcendental argument from stronger, demonstrative ones. An indication of demonstrative support is that the heroic sceptical move of forgoing the form of life that supports the minor premiss is utterly pointless, self-defeating.<sup>7</sup> Suppose, for example, we have a sceptic about the existence of language. We point out to him that his expressions of his scepticism are self-defeating: his expression demonstrates the existence of a particular meaningful sentence, which necessarily implies that language exists. It would be utterly pointless for him now heroically to renounce language; indeed, it would be self-defeating in somewhat the same way that it would be self-defeating for a sceptic about other minds to proceed in trying to win his argument by systematically killing off his fellows. There would be no point in renouncing language unless one had already conceded implicitly the existence of language; the whole point of renouncing it is to avoid having one's sceptical thesis refuted by it. In this sense, the sceptic's expression of his thesis does not merely presuppose something inconsistent with his thesis; it actually demonstrates the falsity of it. Harrison's point still holds: there is no necessity that there should have been

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6. Stroud (1982: 126).

7. Compare Stroud's 'privileged class', in Stroud (1982: 127).

language; the world might have been languageless. Nevertheless, the threat to objectivity involved when the world is held to conform to our presuppositions is absent. In these cases, our forms of life do not merely presuppose something inconsistent with the scepticism in question; rather, our forms of life demonstrate the truth of something inconsistent with scepticism. Other examples of the demonstrative variety of pragmatic support might be arguments that involve appeal to the existence of experience, or thought, as necessarily implying the existence of embodied, or world-situated, persons. Again, if the conditional premiss, 'necessarily if  $p$  then  $q$ ', holds (which I am not discussing at all here), no pragmatic retreat route from the minor premiss ' $p$ ' is available: refraining from experience, or thought – that is, deliberately doing away with it by, say, suicide – would be self-defeating as well as heroic on the part of a sceptic in a way that refraining from personal relationships, practical reason, or attempted reference to vats would not be. Even though it is perfectly possible that there might not have been any experience, or thought, in the universe, doing away with one's own experience or thought concedes its existence; by contrast, refraining from the latter activities makes no concession about the reasons for going in for them or their success.

Now I return to the second question: I will try to apply the above points to arguments which appeal for pragmatic support to human nature, to what we essentially are. Suppose that there are various distinctive features, both negative and positive, limitations and capacities, that are essential to us as human beings. If so, then those that Nussbaum highlights in her reply to the third objection – for example, limitations owing to mortality and physiological requirements, the capacity for practical rationality, and sociality – may plausibly be claimed to be among the stronger candidates for such essential features. Certain kinds of lives, then, could not be lives for us as human beings, given our nature; they would rather be lives for gods, or asocial anthromorphs, or grazing animals, or shellfish.<sup>8</sup> Towards the end of 'Non-Relative Virtues', Nussbaum asks 'What circumstances of existence go to define what it is to live the life of a human being, and not some other life?' and comments: 'Aristotle likes to point out that an inquiry into the human good cannot, on pain of

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8. I am drawing here also on Nussbaum (forthcoming).

incoherence, end up describing the good of some other being, say a god, a good, that on account of our circumstances, it is impossible for us to obtain. If someone is tempted to ask the question: But is it best, after all, to live the life of human being, rather than one of these other kinds of life? The response cannot be simply that it is impossible for human beings to decide to live lives that lack these characteristics. If that were true, the discussion would lose much of its point. As Nussbaum emphasizes,<sup>9</sup> there is no hard external obstacle or knock-down argument against a human being's deciding to live the life of a grazing animal or an asocial anthromorph, even though the cost of doing so would be a radical impoverishment of life. Nevertheless, as she suggests, the very raising of the question for thought or discussion reveals the committed participation of the person who raises it in practical reason, which is pragmatically inconsistent with denying there is reason to go in for it.

What kind of pragmatic inconsistency is there between participating in practical reason and denying its value? If someone were just to keep quiet, empty his mind, and graze, nothing would have been shown. By thus declining to participate in practical reason, he does not covertly participate in it or affirm its value; there is no self-defeatingness about such a heroic response. So, as I suggested earlier, this pragmatic inconsistency seems to provide presuppositional rather than demonstrative support for the importance of practical reason. Is the presuppositional rather than demonstrative force of this pragmatic inconsistency a consequence of the particular context, namely, theories of human nature and scepticism about value? Or can we find a way to run a pragmatic argument in this context that provides the stronger, demonstrative kind of support? This would strengthen the claim that appeal to forms of life underwrites rather than undermines objectivity in this context.

I suggest we consider the idea put forward by various philosophers, that a distinctive property of persons is their capacity for higher-order attitudes. To have attitudes about one's own and others' attitudes it be an interpreter, and in particular a self-interpreter; and self-interpretation that takes the form of working out one's own higher-order desires for example, in the face of conflicting values, can be regarded as a kind of self-determination.<sup>10</sup>

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9. *Ibid.*

10. I elaborate a view of this kind in Hurley (1989).

Consider the view, then, that a cluster of tightly related capacities – for higher-order attitudes, self-interpretation, and self-determination – is essential to persons; we are pragmatically committed to there being reason to exercise them, and hence to their value, through our regular exercise of them. Consider now the position of a sceptic about the value of these capacities and their exercise. Is it open to him to avoid the force of the pragmatic inconsistency of his position by opting out? I suggest not: the desire or intention not to have higher-order attitudes, even if successful (e.g. one deliberately undergoing brain surgery), is itself a higher-order attitude; a belief that one does not have higher-order beliefs (as opposed to a mere lack of higher-order beliefs) is self-defeating. The desire not to be a person, in these respects is itself the characteristic mark of a person, an exercise of the capacity of persons for self-determination even if it results in lobotomy or suicide, or deliberate affirmation of or submersion of oneself in a culture that represses one's status as a person, say, because one is a member of some racial group or religion or because one is female. We find the kind of self-defeatingness here characteristic of the stronger demonstrative kind of pragmatic argument. However, we do not seem to get all the way to a full demonstrative support, even so: the sceptic's attempt to opt out of these forms of life does not demonstrate the truth of the premiss that he is a sceptic about, namely, that there is reason to exercise the capacities in question, merely his practical commitment to it, which could still be unjustified. Perhaps in the evaluative realm this kind of middle ground between the presuppositional and demonstrative cases is the strongest kind of pragmatic support we can hope for; at any rate, I have not been able to think of an evaluative example of fully demonstrative support. Nevertheless, we can get something stronger than mere presuppositional support.

Perhaps not all human beings have these capacities. But, if so, this fact can be accommodated in appropriate cases by saying that some human beings are not persons, rather than that they are not really human.<sup>11</sup> This slippage from talk of what is essential to us human beings to talk of what is essential to us as persons has advantages; there is less of a strain in regarding some lacks as impugning someone's personhood than in regarding them as impugning his humanity. And this slippage allows more scope for that characteristic

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11. See Frankfurt (1971) on the use of the term 'wanton' here, to contrast with 'person'.

human activity of misguided efforts as self-determination, for example, emulation of the beasts, or the gods.

In conclusion: I have sketched the way Nussbaum's view about the relationship between relativism and the practices that ground the virtues, and especially her responses to the third objection she considers, raise a more general issue about the relationship between appeal to forms of life and objectivity. And have pursued her suggestion of a certain pragmatic form of argument, from participation in forms of life to value, in order to consider further senses in which the appeal to forms of life may or may not threaten objectivity.

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