

BRINGING ETHICS BACK IN: CULTURAL PRODUCTION AS A PRACTICE*

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1. The exclusion of ethics

I will begin by commenting on the title of this paper. Working backwards:

I will be using the term ‘practice’ in roughly the sense given to this by Alasdair MacIntyre (in *After Virtue*). A practice is a specific kind of social activity in which the primary aim is to do or achieve what is good, valuable or admirable, judged in terms of the criteria shared by those who engage in it: for example, giving a truthful theatrical performance, or creating an elegant scientific theory.

To think of cultural production (or creative work) as a practice is to consider it as potentially taking this form, and to consider what this might require, and why it might be desirable and so on. Of course, ‘cultural production’ is not a single practice, but a large array of specific practices that may have something in common. I won’t try to define this, but simply say that I will mean by ‘cultural’ the kinds of activities that people who write about ‘the cultural industries’ and ‘cultural work’ generally include under this heading. (So I won’t be addressing the possible distinctions between ‘cultural’ and ‘creative’ work or labour).

To say that thinking of cultural production as a practice involves ‘bringing ethics back in’ implies that ethics has previously been excluded (and wrongly so). I think it has indeed been (largely) excluded both from social *analysis* and from social *criticism*. I will focus for now on the latter, social criticism, and with luck this will help explain what I mean by *ethics*.

If one considers what might be called ‘the normative vocabulary of social criticism’ (especially in the work of social and political philosophers, but I think this applies more widely), there seem to be three main clusters of critical concepts, three main objects of critical concern. The first is to do with *justice*, fairness, equality and so on: the issues here are to do with the fair distribution of resources and opportunities. The second is to do with *power*, and its legitimate exercise (legitimate *authority*), and hence with criticism of domination, oppression, subjection and the like.

The third is to do with ‘the kinds of life’ that people are able to live – the relationships they have with others, the activities they engage in, the goals they pursue, the experiences available to them, what it is that matters to them. These are the concerns of (what I shall mean by) *ethical* criticism; for those philosophers

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who use the term in this sense, ethical criticism is to do with ‘the good’, or ‘the good life’. Criticism couched in ethical terms is not (on my account) directed at *individuals*, blaming them for ‘not living well’ – moralising, being ‘judgmental’ and so on. Rather, it’s directed primarily at institutional arrangements that make it difficult for them to do so (difficult to ‘live satisfying lives’, to ‘flourish’ and so on). So I’m adopting a broadly Aristotelian conception of ethics, as does MacIntyre – and likewise Marx, whose critique of alienation is an example of specifically ethical criticism, in the sense I am giving this here.

Now there are some important (or at least influential) schools of social criticism which reject all three of these elements as a basis for critique (including, in the old days, ‘scientific socialism’; nowadays, some forms of postmodernism). This is often because they are sceptical about the possibility of *any* ‘value-judgments’, and/or cynical about the reasons for which these are actually made or accepted. The whole normative vocabulary of social criticism is rejected. But there are other schools of social criticism that are perfectly happy to conduct their critiques in terms of justice or power, but not in terms of ethics or ‘the good’. They want to *restrict* the vocabulary of social criticism, and this is what I’m against. But I am not claiming that ethics is more important than issues of justice or power.

This restrictive view can be found, for example, both amongst liberal political philosophers, such as Rawls, and in Habermas’s critical social theory (see Keat 2008a). In the former case, it is embodied in the principle of state neutrality: the powers of the state should not be used to support legislation, regulation or other policies based on ethical judgments or ideals. Individuals should be left to decide for themselves what ‘the good life for them’ consists in, and the state should be concerned only with securing a fair distribution of the resources and opportunities that enable individuals to pursue their own, freely chosen ‘conceptions of the good’. And in modern, pluralistic societies, people’s conceptions of the good differ widely, it is claimed.

Further, many (though not all) liberal political theorists believe that the market, or a market economy, is the most effective institutional means for achieving ethical neutrality. Its distributive outcomes may well be unjust, and require major forms of state intervention to rectify. But that, they argue, is a quite different matter from ‘discriminating’, on the basis of collectively made ethical judgments, between the kinds of preferences that people may wish to satisfy once they have fair access to resources and opportunities. One of the implications of this neutralist exclusion of ethics is to remove the nature and value of *work* from the political agenda: from the agendas both of political philosophy and political debate (see Keat 2009a and 2011a).

But neutralist liberalism has not had things all its own way in the past few decades: there have been important challenges to its exclusion of ethics from politics, and hence from social criticism as a basis for political action. (And in the case of critical social theory, Habermas has himself modified his previous position, and now gives ethics a place in political deliberation, though I don’t think his conception of ethics is satisfactory: see Habermas 1996, chapter 4; Keat 2009b). Two important challenges have come from Martha Nussbaum and Joseph Raz (see Keat 2011b). What they have argued is that ethical considerations can play a part in political decisions and form the basis for state action *without* this posing a threat to the ethical autonomy of individuals, and in ways that leave ample room for diversity and variety in the ways

that 'a life worth living' can be lived – diversity as between both individuals and cultures (in the anthropological sense). Their philosophical position opens up the possibility for 'good work' to be back on the political agenda.

Unlike MacIntyre, both Raz and Nussbaum 'take liberalism seriously', and want to preserve what they see as valuable in its basic principles and political institutions. And I'm on their side in this respect. But I think that MacIntyre's conception of social practices can contribute a lot to thinking critically about the nature of 'good work', and to the understanding (or social *analysis*) of cultural work or production in particular.

2. The concept of practices

Most accounts of MacIntyre's concept of practices (including several that I have provided) start with his formal definition, and then try to explicate its technical terms.¹¹ But I'm going to take a different approach this time. This is partly so that I can introduce some elements that he doesn't himself include. Some of these are in the spirit of his own account, others less so.

Consider the following activities, which I take from a list presented by Jon Elster (1989, p 129): playing the piano, cooking a meal, developing computer software, juggling with a chainsaw, writing a book, trying to prove a mathematical theorem, working a lathe, doing embroidery, building a boat. These all involve the use of complex skills and judgment. They are often quite demanding, sometimes even challenging, yet people seem to enjoy doing them, for reasons that are distinct from any extrinsic rewards they may also receive. And, especially when people perform these on a regular basis, as a significant element in their lives, they are usually keen to do them *well* (though not necessarily to be 'the best': to be *good* at them is 'good enough').

These activities are 'essentially *social*'. I don't mean by this that they cannot be performed by oneself, and indeed quite often they are. But whether done solo or in direct cooperation with others, these are socially 'enabled' (or even 'constituted') activities. The skills that are acquired and used by any individuals have been developed by others, and are 'already there' to be learned; the activities concerned have their own histories; and the desire to perform them *well* only makes sense given certain criteria of judgment that are shared by others who perform this kind of activity.

There may be disagreements about these criteria, and about their application in particular cases. But what they basically do is to define various features of the activity's performance that are relevant to its evaluation: they identify the 'good (or bad)-making qualities' of how it has been performed, including its outcome or 'final product' – the software that has been designed, the book that has been written, and so on. Thus wanting to do these things well, and enjoying this when one manages to do so, is wanting and

¹ MacIntyre defines the concept of a *practice* as: "... any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." (MacIntyre 1981, p.175).

enjoying these specific features of the activity and its outcome. (These are, in effect, what make it 'intrinsically satisfying', or give rise to such satisfactions). They are what MacIntyre calls the *internal goods* of the activity, and what these internal goods are is specific to the particular kind of activity concerned, and depends on what he calls its 'standards of excellence' (though I confess to having some aversion to this term). In these and other respects, internal goods differ radically from what he calls 'external' ones, such as money, power and status or prestige. I shall talk about these later.

A 'practice', then - and by now I have introduced pretty much every element in MacIntyre's formal definition - is a social activity in which those who engage in it, the practitioners, are primarily oriented towards the internal goods of the type of activity concerned. In terms of social *analysis* or social enquiry, this means that to understand any particular practice, we have (inter alia) to understand these internal goods (and the standards that partly define them). Another way of putting this is that we can only understand the *reasons for which* actions are performed within practices by understanding its internal goods and standards, since it is these that define what counts (for practitioners) as a relevant reason for acting.

So what practitioners do is aimed at realising certain 'goods'. In this sense their activities are *ethical*. But this not mean that they are 'ethical' in the more familiar, everyday sense of this term, i.e. of being performed primarily to benefit others, non-practitioners: to 'meet other people's needs' or suchlike. There can be practices that do have such aims, and these will then be expressed in the practice's internal goods. But it is not a defining feature of practices: they are not necessarily 'ethical' in this everyday - one might perhaps call it 'moral' - sense. (There is nothing morally admirable about engaging in a practice, as such; rather, people are very fortunate if they find themselves able to do so, and especially if they can earn their living this way).

There are, however, very important moral elements *within* practices, in terms of the relationships of practitioners with one another. MacIntyre conceptualises these in terms of what he calls the (moral) *virtues*, and especially the need for justice, honesty and courage. One way of seeing this (though this is not how MacIntyre presents the argument) is to consider the role of *recognition* in practices.

Those engaged in practices need other practitioners to provide them with recognition in at least two respects. First, they need to have the value or quality of what they have done 'recognised', in the sense of being *confirmed* (or not), since they want to perform well, to produce something good, but may be unsure whether they have achieved this. Second, they also want the fact that it is *they* who have produced this, or contributed to its production, to be *acknowledged*, rather than being ignored, passed off as someone else's, and so on. In both cases they must rely on the *honesty* and *fairness* of other practitioners' judgments. And they must also be willing to exercise these moral virtues themselves, in the responses they make to others' contributions and performance.

Indeed, a certain 'generosity of spirit' on the part of (at least most of) its members is required, if practices are to flourish. And this generosity will include taking pleasure in, and responding warmly to, what others achieve, despite the disappointment of its being *their* achievement, and not one's own. This is partly just because these products *are* 'admirable achievements', but partly also because they contribute to *the practice*

itself - to film-making, jazz, juggling and so on - i.e. to something else that they also value and have in common with one another.

This last point, about 'the practice itself', may suggest the need to include in any account of practices the presence of certain kinds of *affective attachment* to the practice, as something to be protected, cared for, nurtured or even 'loved'. Some version of 'an ethic of care' may well be important here, but with the 'object' of such care consisting in the practice itself, rather than (or as well as) those who engage in it. (MacIntyre himself talks at times of 'care for' the shared goods of a practice, and what I've suggested here is also arguably consistent with the position he takes in his later *Dependent Rational Animals*).

There is one final element I would like to add here, though this time probably 'against the spirit' of MacIntyre's own conception of practices. There seems to me something unattractively austere or impersonal about the picture he presents, at least for our 'modern times'. Of course, it's wonderful to learn to appreciate and enjoy the internal goods of practices. And coming to care about and for them is also very attractive, because anything that focuses one's concerns on something other than oneself is usually pretty satisfying. But what's missing, I think, is something more personal, something that makes the practice resonate for people who engage in it, something that attracts them because of the way it connects with their own experience, hopes and needs. It has to be meaningful *for them*, as it were. Without this, their motivation remains partly unexplained. But *with* it come all sorts of tensions and ambivalences, given what I have said about the practice's social character and moral requirements. (The preceding comments are consistent, I think, with the connections between cultural practices and reflexive modernisation suggested by Mark Banks in *The Politics of Cultural Work*, chapter 5).

3. Practices and institutions

MacIntyre thinks there is a wide range of social activities that can potentially have the character of practices. These include: the various arts and sciences (such as music and painting, physics and astronomy); sports and games; the conduct of politics and the activities of 'households', and what he calls 'productive' activities such as fishing and farming, architecture and building, and so on. But he also thinks that the central institutions of modern societies, especially those of the capitalist market and the business corporation, are inherently antithetical to the conduct of social activities as practices. To the extent that practices still survive (and his examples suggest that this applies to at least some cultural practices), we find them only at 'the margins' of society, where these institutions have been kept at bay.

What is it about these institutions that makes them antithetical to practices, and to cultural practices in particular? It might be tempting to think it's because they are 'all about money, power and status', about what MacIntyre calls 'external' goods. But this can't be so (for MacIntyre), since he insists that practices necessarily depend on institutions, and that institutions involve the systematic use of external goods. "Practices", he declares, "must not be confused with institutions. Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions." (One could add to these cases: the practice of film-making, as distinct from film studios as institutions). And institutions, he says,

“are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards.” (MacIntyre 1981, p. 181).

However, this dependence of practices on institutions is inherently problematic, he says: there is a constant danger that the use of money, power and status will undermine the integrity of the practice, rather than sustaining it. (Some critics of MacIntyre argue that he never shows just why institutions – especially those of the kind he refers to here, namely *organisations* - are necessary for practices, and propose that this element in his overall theory should be rejected. But I will not pursue this here). So we have to be very careful to design and maintain ‘the right kinds of institutions’ for practices, to ensure that the use of external goods serves the purposes of the practice and does not damage it, or undermine its integrity.

But is it true that market institutions and commercial enterprises are ‘the wrong kinds’ of institutions for practices, and for cultural practices in particular? Do these need to remain ‘on the margins’ if they are to preserve their integrity? One has to avoid taking apparently attractive short-cuts here. For example, one can’t just say: ‘commercial firms aim at making profits, so they won’t be concerned with the internal goods and standards of a practice’, since it might turn out that the most effective way of achieving this aim is to organise their production in a practice-like way. What one has to show is that the specific ways in which market institutions impact on the decisions made by firms (and their forms of organisation) make it difficult or impossible for practices to be sustained within them: that these pressures lead to a ‘misuse’ of money, power and status *within* the firm (or ‘organisation’), in terms of their proper functions in supporting production as a practice.

A lot more needs to be said about these ‘proper functions’, but I won’t do so directly here. Instead I shall comment on some of the attempts I have made to explore these issues about practices and institutions in various publications, since first reading *After Virtue* a rather long time ago. (My apologies for this self-indulgence, but I think that some relevant points for thinking about cultural production as a practice may emerge from what follows).

When I first started thinking about this, in the mid-1980s, I reckoned that MacIntyre was right to think that marketisation would be damaging to cultural practices and the ‘goods’ they ‘produce’, and tried to explain why this was so. The argument was presented in ‘Consumer Sovereignty and the Integrity of Practices’, published in 1991 in *Enterprise Culture*, a collection co-edited with Nick Abercrombie (reprinted in Keat 2000). I won’t spell out the argument, which focused mainly on the ‘vulnerability of producers to consumers’, but merely note that it depended on there being an antithetical relationship between market economies and *any* kind of practice, so that what was said to be damaging to *cultural* practices was explained in terms of *generic* features of practices and their institutional requirements, and not of their specifically ‘cultural’, or indeed ‘creative’ character.

What then began to worry me was that if this were so, we’d never find anything practice-like in non-cultural areas either, in ‘mainstream economic production’. MacIntyre was quite confident that this was so, but it increasingly seemed to me that this confidence depended at least partly on accepting certain

orthodox schools of economic and organisational theory - neo-classical accounts of markets and Weberian accounts of firms - which had themselves been subject to a good deal of persuasive criticism. It looked as if the relationship between practices and market economies might be quite *variable*, depending on the presence or absence of various specific conditions. These doubts were explored in 'Markets, Firms and Practices', published in 2000 in *Cultural Goods and the Limits of the Market*.

Some years later I tried to see if anything more systematic could be said about this variability. I became interested in the literature in comparative political economy on 'varieties of capitalism', especially Peter Hall and David Soskice's volume with that title. They were trying to show that the different institutional arrangements of 'Coordinated Market Economies' (CMEs), such as Germany, and 'Liberal Market Economies' (LMEs), such as the UK and USA, had significant effects on the organisation and behaviour of firms. And although the concept of practices was far from their concerns, I tried to show that these differences made CMEs more conducive to economic production as a practice than LMEs. (The argument is presented most fully in 'Practices, Firms and Varieties of Capitalism', published in 2008 in *Philosophy of Management*).

I won't rehearse the argument here, but amongst the features of CMEs that I argued were helpful to production as a practice in CMEs were: 'patient capital' (the absence of pressures for short-term profitability); the less prominent organisational position of finance directors; extensive use of highly skilled, workers with a significant degree of 'workplace autonomy'; competition focused on quality rather than price; the career-paths of managers, drawn from technically qualified production workers rather than generic managerial training backgrounds; and the major role of 'horizontal', industry-wide *associations*, to which all firms within each industry belong, and responsible for the provision of technical training (with a strong craft-orientation), research and development and technology transfer.

Of course, even if it's true that these features of CMEs are broadly favourable to the conduct of economic production as a practice, it doesn't follow that their presence would enable *cultural* production to take this form, given its distinctive character. (Indeed, Hall and Soskice argue that whereas CMEs are good for what they call 'incremental innovation', LMEs are better for 'radical' innovation, and it's conceivable that it's the latter, not the former, that cultural production 'requires!'). The argument that I have sketched does, however, have some potentially significant implications for how one should think about this issue.

The first concerns the importance in CMEs of 'horizontal' associations. When MacIntyre talks about the necessity of institutions for practices, the examples that he provides are of hospitals (for the practice of medicine), laboratories (for physics), chess-clubs (for chess), and so on. But perhaps he should also have pointed to a different kind of 'institution': to associations of medics, physicists and chess-players. For although the conduct of a practice typically takes place within discrete, bounded organisational entities such as hospitals (or even firms!), the practice itself is not thus bounded: it (and its standards, internal goods etc) is something shared by its practitioners across these boundaries, and for this to be sustained, there may need to be institutions that reflect this. (However, the German case may not point in quite the

right direction, since one might argue that it is *occupationally*-based associations that are most valuable for practices, rather than *industry*-based ones. Denmark is possibly a good case of the former).

Second – and turning now to what goes on ‘within’ discrete organisations – there may be some illuminating parallels between certain aspects of the internal organisation of productive enterprises in CMEs, by contrast with their LME counterparts, and the contrasts drawn in some of the literature on the internal organisation of cultural industry enterprises. In the latter, it is argued by some that there has been a fairly recent shift towards the increasing influence of marketing departments and personnel on the process (and products) of cultural production, reducing the ‘creative autonomy’ of cultural workers or producers themselves (see Hesmondhalgh 2007, chapter 7; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011, chapter 3). The same might perhaps be said about the enhanced role of finance departments and personnel.

According to Hall and Soskice, firms in CMEs differ from their LME counterparts in the comparatively lesser or ‘subordinate’ position of finance departments and personnel with respect to production. And my guess is that the same may well apply to the position of marketing. One might then say that in CMEs there is a higher degree of ‘producer autonomy’ within firms than there is in LMEs, and hence that the shift towards a reduction in the autonomy of creative workers/producers in cultural industries could be seen as a shift from CME to LME-type internal organisation. And this shift could also be seen as damaging to the conduct of cultural production as a practice, which requires something like the internal organisational autonomy of cultural workers (or practitioners).

It is this organisational autonomy that enables the kinds of reasons and reasoning that belong to the practice to ‘hold sway’ in the process of cultural production. What cultural practices and creative workers need is ‘a free space’ within which to ‘create’, an intra-organisational space within which it is only the internal goods and standards of the practice that matter, that count as relevant reasons. And thinking in these terms can contribute something to MacIntyre’s own conception of the relationship between practices and institutions. As Kelvin Knight has argued, MacIntyre’s basic principle is that, for practices to flourish, the external goods of an institution must be subordinated to the internal goods of the practice Knight 2007, pp. 144-167). What I am suggesting here is that we think about this in more concrete, organisational terms: of the ‘subordination’ of some organisational elements to others.

Of course, in *any* kind of *market* economy, whether CME or LME, the organisational autonomy of creative producers is subject to the ‘discipline’ of the market, and of consumer choices in particular. However wonderful the creative product, judged in terms of the practice’s standards, if consumers won’t buy it, the firm can’t afford to make it. This is the market as a product-selection mechanism, and as I’ll indicate briefly later on, there’s a certain kind of ‘rough justice’ about this. But it can, I think, be argued that it’s better for cultural products to be created autonomously, and then ‘fail’ in actual markets, than it is for them to be shaped, in the process of their production, by considerations that are alien to the cultural practice itself; better, as it were, for the final outcome, the choices of consumers, not to be anticipated and fed into that process.

4. Ethics, politics and cultural practices

Why does it *matter* whether cultural production is or can be conducted as a practice? (And hence why be interested in identifying the institutional arrangements that are more or less conducive to this?). There are at least two possible reasons. Both are important, but they are very different from each other. One is that this would be better for cultural *workers*; the other is that it would be better for cultural *products*, which itself matters because they are valuable for people *other* than their creators.

According to the first answer, cultural production being conducted as a practice contributes significantly to its being *good work*. It doesn't incorporate everything that matters here: most obviously, issues of pay and job security, which we know are major problems for most cultural/creative workers. But the concept of practices may help us to understand some of the standard features of good work, such as the sources or bases of 'intrinsic satisfaction', and it may also add some important elements to do with the character of the social relationships involved in good work, and the possible value of practitioners' concerns for (and attachments to) the practices themselves. (Here we need to distinguish 'doing it because one loves doing it' in the sense of *enjoying* the activity, from 'doing it because one loves *it*', i.e. the practice itself).

However, there is presumably no *more* reason to be concerned about good work for cultural (creative) workers than for any other workers. (Indeed, to the extent that cultural workers benefit from being engaged in a practice, which most workers do not, there is perhaps *less* reason). Or, to put this point more positively: we should be aiming to provide good work for everyone; securing the availability of good work should be a central objective of government policy. To put this in the language of *opportunities*: we should aim not only at making opportunities *equal* - at removing discrimination, unfair disadvantages and so on - but at making them *good* and *plentiful*. And this means that ethical judgments about the value of such opportunities, about what they are opportunities *for*, have to be made, and made at a societal level since they involve decisions about institutional design. (The claims I made about different varieties of capitalism would be relevant here). So we have to reject the 'exclusion of ethics' from politics that I talked about earlier in this paper.

The second reason why it may matter that cultural production is conducted as a practice, is if this would be better in terms of what *products* get generated, and if *this* is important because cultural products are especially valuable, in ethical terms. Political communities should then try to ensure 'a good and plentiful supply' of cultural products, and if it turns out that a market economy, *whatever* specific form its institutions take, cannot be relied upon to do this - because it will not be fully compatible with cultural production as a practice - there will be a case for supporting forms of *non-market* provision. Hence the debates about public service broadcasting, arts subsidies, and/or the regulation of commercial culture-producers (see Keat, forthcoming).

Now there are a lot of difficult issues here. But the point I want to emphasise is that if we do not make (and/or cannot justify) ethical judgments about the value of (good) cultural products, then we will not be able to justify the use of state powers, revenue etc, to support their non-market provision. (Scepticism about values makes it difficult to support non-market provision, as I argued in 'Scepticism, authority and

the market', Keat 2000, 33-51). Without such judgments (about the value of cultural 'goods') there is no way of resisting the standard pro-market response to demands by creative workers for such support: 'if what you enjoy doing is not commercially viable – if you cannot make a decent living through creative work in the market – then do it as a pastime instead, do it as an amateur; people have no right to be paid for doing something just because they enjoy doing it'. And although I don't altogether approve of the 'sentiment' here, I would agree that creative workers have no *more* right to this than anyone else. If there is to be any '*special case*', it must be based on (some judgment about) the value of the product, not on the well-being of the cultural worker.

But on what grounds might such a judgment be made? Here I shall just make one suggestion. It might be argued that a central feature of at least many forms of cultural production is their provision of what might be called 'resources for ethical self-reflection': for the kinds of processes through which individuals reflect on issues about 'the good'. (So perhaps we need to expand Raymond Williams's idea of 'the communication of experience' to include also its 'enlargement' and 'reflection on it'). That is, at least part of the value of many cultural goods is that they enable people to reflect on what matters to them in their lives (Keat 2000, 149-171). And this may include thinking about the priority they want to give to different elements in these lives: for example, to being with their friends and looking after their children, as compared with the kinds of well-being they may achieve through the purchase and use of consumer goods (which, I should emphasise, I do *not* regard as inherently trivial or insignificant).

What I mean by such ethical self-reflection is nicely captured in the following passage from an article by John Mepham. Talking about certain kinds of cultural products he says that they can:

"... very directly enhance the processing which the viewer constantly attempts in his or her own everyday life. They can, at their best, produce a constant stream of puzzles relating to the morals and tactics of everyday affairs and offer to the viewer a range of possible solutions which can be mulled over, assessed, assimilated or rejected. They can expand the viewer's sense of what is possible, enhance his or her vocabularies and repertoires of words, gestures and initiatives. They are the great laboratory of modern everyday life. Of course, they can only achieve these things if they are of high quality." (Mepham 1990, p 67).

Mepham is talking here about what he calls 'TV fictions', including sitcoms, popular drama and especially *soap opera*. So this kind of ethical argument for the value of 'good cultural products' is not limited to so-called 'high culture'.²

² Mepham argues that TV fictions can, at their best, perform similar, and similarly valuable functions to those performed by their 'high culture' counterparts. Indeed, he suggests various ways in which Soap, in particular, has certain advantages over its obvious predecessor, the nineteenth century realist novel, as a resource for personal reflection, or what he calls the 'processing' of their lives by individuals. The advantages he identifies for Soap are the absence of authorial privilege and the open-endedness of their stories, which he regards as especially valuable for members of 'late modern' societies. Mepham also emphasises a second important use for 'story-telling', to do with understanding the different and apparently alien lives of others.

Further, there needs also to be some kind of collective, societal-level parallel to this ethical self-reflection on the part of individuals. That is, there has to be reflection and decision at the societal level about the priorities to be given to the various sources and bases of human well-being, the different kinds of goods that make for flourishing lives, and so on. *Contra* Hayek, we cannot simply ‘devolve’ all such decisions to the individual level. This is because the kinds of goods that are available to individuals, as the ‘objects’ of their possible choices, are themselves strongly influenced by the kinds of *institutions* that obtain. These institutions – including those of the market itself – are dependent in various ways on state action, and are hence the responsibility of citizens in a democratic polity.

If this argument is roughly correct, then flourishing cultural practices have an important role in politics, once we conceive of politics as something that should possess an *ethical* dimension, along with other (equally important) kinds of normative concerns with justice and power. When politics becomes ethical, cultural practices become political through their ethical character.³

³ This has some implications for Habermas’s conception of the public sphere. If we take seriously the place of ethics in politics, and the centrality of cultural production to ethical reflection, then ‘the cultural public sphere’ becomes just as important as the ‘political public sphere’ for democratic politics. Put in terms of ‘public service broadcasting’: maintaining the high quality of soap opera may be as important as the provision of impartial and serious news programmes.

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