

## SCEPTICISM, AUTHORITY AND THE MARKET\*

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This paper explores some philosophical issues raised by current debates about the desirability of protecting cultural practices from the effects of unregulated market forces. In particular, it considers the implications for these debates of relationships between forms of social authority and epistemological theories, ie theories about whether, and in what ways, various kinds of knowledge-claims can be justified.<sup>1</sup> I start by noting what strike me as some significant features of the theoretical and political alignments that often emerge in these debates:

(1) Those who try to defend the special status of cultural practices, to exclude or protect them from the market domain, are frequently accused of being (cultural) *elitists*, of displaying a contemptuous attitude towards the tastes and judgments of 'ordinary consumers'. This anti-elitist rhetoric seems often to be used both by the bosses of multi-national media empires and by 'radical' cultural theorists who otherwise have little in common with them.

(2) Many economic theorists, including those who are especially keen to promote the virtues of the market, are *subjectivists* about the epistemological status of value-judgments (see Plant 1989, Roy 1989). That is, they regard such judgments - about ethical, aesthetic and similarly 'evaluative' matters - as no more than the expression of individual tastes or preferences, and hence as having no rational or objective mode of justification. In doing so they espouse a particular form of philosophical *scepticism*.

(3) 'Post-modernist' social theorists - by which I mean those who celebrate, rather than merely chart, the supposed emergence of a radically new form of social and cultural life, and are correspondingly disparaging about its predecessor, modernity - are sometimes accused of complicity with the (capitalist) market and/or its 'consumer culture' (see Jameson 1984, but cf Selden 1991). Such theorists tend also to endorse the kind of scepticism about knowledge to be found in post-structuralist philosophy and literary theory; and one reason for their celebration of post-modernity is their belief that the social 'authority' of such knowledge and its bearers in modern societies is now waning (see Bauman, 1987).

Whether or not these 'observations' are correct, they serve to indicate the main questions that will be explored in this paper. Do arguments for the exclusion of cultural practices from the market require the defence of certain forms of social authority for cultural 'producers', and a corresponding rejection of the authority or 'sovereignty' of consumers? Are such arguments undermined by scepticism about particular forms of knowledge or judgment?

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<sup>1</sup> 'Knowledge-claims' here include claims to justified beliefs, whether actually true or not. Correspondingly, I take scepticism to deny the possibility of justified beliefs, not merely of true and/or conclusively justified ones.

And does scepticism about values - commonly termed 'meta-ethical' scepticism - itself justify the use of the market for any products about whose value, according to such scepticism, no justifiable knowledge-claims can be made?

I shall now explore (1) in more detail, which may make its connections with (2) and (3), and its bearing on the questions just noted, a little less opaque. I shall then go on to examine what is involved in the ascription of sovereignty to consumers in orthodox economic theory, and to present a (partly) hypothetical example of how such sovereignty might be seen by cultural producers as challenging their authority. I shall conclude by sketching an argument for the protection of cultural practices from the market, and considering how this would be affected by meta-ethical scepticism.

### **1 Elitism, authority and modernity**

When those who work in non-market cultural institutions try to resist their subordination to market forces, they often claim that the effect of this would be to compromise the integrity of their practices<sup>2</sup>, to distort their proper character, to undermine the quality of what would become their marketable 'products', and so on.

So, for example, academics often argue that the pressure to compete for students will undermine their conception of what is educationally worthwhile; television producers, that the de-regulation of broadcasting will lead to a decline in the quality of programmes; subsidised theatre and dance companies, that the commercially modelled criteria for funding imposed by the Arts Council will inhibit artistic innovation; and museum curators, that being reduced to the status of a leisure industry will put at risk the proper purposes of their collections.

Such objections are often met with the charge of elitism. For surely, it is said, the essential feature of the market is the sovereignty of the consumer, and hence the exercise of control over what is produced by the judgments of consumers? If so, to resist such control can only indicate an elitist contempt for consumers' judgments, tastes, intelligence and so on, and a corresponding insistence that they should instead defer to the authority of a cultural elite.

Yet many who oppose the commercialisation of cultural practices in these terms do not regard themselves as elitists. So how might they rebut this accusation? Clearly, a good deal depends here on how 'elitism' is defined; and although this term is often now used to convey little more than content-less political abuse, one can still identify at least two relatively clear and distinct senses of it, which I shall call 'elitism of access' and 'elitism of judgment'. In the case of cultural practices, the former might be expressed in the slogan 'high culture is only for us, the few', the latter in 'high culture is what we few who can judge these matters say it is'.

In more theoretical terms, the former concerns the potential social range of distribution of various valued forms of experience, appreciation, enjoyment and so on - the elitist of access claiming that this is necessarily, or at least desirably, highly limited. By contrast, the latter concerns the social location of the judgments which, as it were,

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<sup>2</sup> My use of the term 'practices' involves an implicit reference to Alasdair MacIntyre's specific conceptualisation of these, though much of the time it can be understood in a more theoretically neutral sense: see MacIntyre

confer value on such items - the elitist of judgment claiming that that this too is necessarily or desirably limited to some specific social group.<sup>3</sup>

It seems clear that resistance to the market need not involve commitment to elitism of access. For whilst cultural practitioners may fear the effects of competition to satisfy existing consumer preferences, they may nonetheless believe that pretty well anyone who wishes to is potentially capable of experiencing and appreciating the 'products' of these cultural practices. What is more problematic is elitism of judgment: can the kinds of claims noted earlier about the potentially damaging effects of the market be made without commitment to this form of elitism? My answer to this is: 'Yes - but only if one is not an epistemological sceptic, and not without appealing to some form of social authority'.

That there is no necessary commitment to elitism of judgment might be argued as follows. The relevant judgments here can be supported by forms of reasoning and argument that are open to anyone to understand and evaluate; and the criteria by reference to which they are made can likewise be rationally justified, or at least intelligibly and openly contested. Hence they are not necessarily the judgments of an elite group who declare, in effect, 'these things are valuable, true etc just because we say so'. Indeed, it might be said, to reject this argument would imply that simply to believe that rationally defensible judgments are possible is elitist - and this is absurd.

This argument is quite persuasive as far as it goes. But it fails to engage with a further set of problems which are perhaps what those who make the charge of elitism (of judgement) often have in mind, even if their concerns are not best expressed through this particular concept. To see what may be involved here, I will briefly consider an apparently extreme example, that of science, and the judgments made by the members of a scientific community.

This case is 'extreme' in that, of all forms of intellectual inquiry - and also of cultural practices, if one may regard such forms of enquiry as belonging to this broad category - science can be seen as having the strongest claim to operate at least potentially in accordance with rationally justifiable criteria (via rules of evidence, hypothetico-deductive theory-testing, etc), so that scientific judgments are open to essentially impersonal and objective standards of assessment.

Indeed it is precisely this feature of science that makes it the paradigmatic instance of *modern* knowledge. In particular - and the same story can be told of, eg, 'modern' philosophy - its practitioners typically represent this discipline as originating, historically, in the overthrow of all appeals to 'authority', ie of all attempts to justify scientific claims by reference to the beliefs or judgments of particular individuals, social groups, members of religious institutions etc. Such appeals to authority were to be replaced by reliance upon canons of reasoning and the proper use of empirical evidence, regarded not only as the epistemologically relevant criteria for assessing scientific claims, but also - at least in Enlightenment thought, and closely related to its ideal of individual autonomy - as depending on, and made possible by, human capacities which everyone either possesses, or can in principle acquire and exercise.

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(1981), especially ch.14, and my discussion of this in Keat (1991), which forms the background for much of the present paper.

<sup>3</sup> One reason for distinguishing these two is that, at least on the face of it, the latter does not entail the former.

Yet however convincing this account of modern science is epistemologically, it is potentially misleading sociologically. For both the conduct of scientific research, and even more obviously the education of scientists, require complex forms of social authority, in which particular individuals and groups are accorded, by virtue of their supposed expertise, training etc, the right to make judgments about the merits of others' scientific work, and legitimate power to enforce these. Similar points apply to the ways in which the judgments of a scientific community are themselves accorded such authority when its 'knowledge' is practically employed or relied upon outside that community.

So even if it is true that 'anyone and everyone' can in principle reconstruct and evaluate for themselves the lines of reasoning and evidential support for any scientific claim, both the internal conduct and external role of science would be impossible if this were the social process through which the validation and application of such claims actually took place.<sup>4</sup>

At the risk of hasty generalisation from this particular case, one might then suggest that every social practice which either depends upon, or issues in, knowledge-claims - whether these are scientific, aesthetic, moral, philosophical etc - requires some relatively coherent and effective forms of social authority. And relatedly, one might also distinguish two different kinds of criticism that may be directed at specific exercises of such authority. First, it may be claimed that the authority has been *abused*, in that the judgments made fail to accord with the practice's own criteria as a result, for instance, of the intrusion of their authors' particular social interests.

Alternatively, however, it may be claimed that the authority in question is *ill-founded*, in that the criteria upon which these judgments are based are themselves defective in various ways. The most radical version of this second kind of criticism is the *sceptic's*, according to which there are *no* criteria by which these judgments can be evaluated, no way of justifying any claims to knowledge in this particular domain. Scepticism, that is, necessarily de-legitimises any form of social authority in the domain of knowledge to which such scepticism is thought to apply. The exercise of such authority must then appear as no more than the arbitrary exercise of power, as the concealed expression of its bearers' social interests.<sup>5</sup>

If this is so, and if what underlies current charges of cultural elitism is hostility to certain forms of social authority, one would expect to find a correlation between anti-elitist rhetoric and scepticism about the relevant form of knowledge or judgment. This seems to be confirmed by the current prevalence of such rhetoric in the aesthetic domain, where scepticism is probably at its strongest. One would also expect to find a tendency to regard anyone who is not an aesthetic sceptic as a cultural elitist - a view which, whilst conceptually somewhat

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<sup>4</sup> It is Thomas Kuhn's emphasis on such features of scientific practice that partly give rise to his criticisms of Karl Popper's 'Enlightenment' view of science: for a brief account of the two, see Chalmers (1986). But like other conservative thinkers, Kuhn also denies that scientific judgments are, even in principle, wholly reconstructible in terms of impersonal criteria of rationality: see Kuhn (1977), and also Ravetz (1971) for a brilliant account of the delicate social mechanisms required for the 'quality control' of scientific work, conceived as a craft practice.

<sup>5</sup> One might speculate that (the perception of) recurrent abuses of authority generates cynicism, and that cynicism makes people more susceptible to what might otherwise appear to be rather bizarre forms of philosophical scepticism.

confused, may nonetheless express a significant social insight.

Furthermore, this account may explain (if any explanation is necessary) why post-modernist social theorists, who tend to be sceptics about the possibility of 'foundations' for any kind of knowledge or judgment (except perhaps their own, which they often seem happy to impose on their students through their authority as academics) tend also to represent modernity and the Enlightenment as 'authoritarian' - a charge that scientists and others of a 'modern' frame of mind find especially distressing, for the reasons indicated above.<sup>6</sup> Again, whilst conceptually confused, this may have the virtue of encouraging such 'moderns' to acknowledge the necessary role of social authority within their intellectual practices - even if, rightly unconvinced by such scepticism, they continue to regard this authority as legitimate.

## **2 Consumer sovereignty and the authority of consumer preferences**

I turn now to the concept of consumer sovereignty, and explore its relationship to the issues about scepticism and authority presented above. Although one is unlikely to find much explicit discussion of this concept in standard textbook accounts of a market economy, I shall suggest that its implicit role in these has considerable significance for arguments about what kinds of activities and goods are suitably located within the market domain. I begin with a sketch of how the free market system is supposed (ie theoretically) to operate which, whilst highly simplified, is I hope recognisably related to neo-classical economic theory and to influential justifications for the market which draw upon this.

In a market economy, rival producers compete with one another in pursuing their overall aim of profit-maximisation. Their success or failure in this task is ultimately determined by their relative ability to meet, in a cost-effective manner, the demands of actual or potential purchasers of their products: ie to satisfy the wants or preferences of consumers, where these preferences are indicated by the consumer's willingness to pay for the products on offer. Consumers are free to choose between the producers from whom they will make such purchases; and thus the failure of any producer to satisfy these preferences is typically met by the 'exit' response of taking their custom elsewhere. Likewise, new firms are free to enter the competitive process at any point, and/or existing firms to develop new products, etc. But their success in doing so is always subject to their relative ability to satisfy the preferences of consumers.

This picture of how the free market is meant to operate is closely related to an influential justificatory account, ie one that tries to show why the market is a better set of mechanisms, procedures, institutions etc than any other (eg than a state-controlled system, a feudal/guild one, a hunter-gatherer one, and so on). This consists in claiming that a market system is the most efficient, in the sense that for any given set of resources, it maximises the total amount of preference-satisfaction that can be obtained from their use.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hence the hostility of more orthodox philosophers of science to Paul Feyerabend's Humean and/or post-modernist scepticism, and to his view of scientific rationality as oppressive, which lead him to propose the 'disestablishment' of science - if 'anything goes' there can be no justification for scientific authority: see Feyerabend (1988).

<sup>7</sup> Here I ignore more technical issues about Pareto-optimality etc: on these see Buchanan (1985), and also for a distinction between 'ethical' and 'efficiency' justifications for the market.

But what exactly is meant by a 'preference' here? The brief answer is *anything*, or at least anything that may incline someone towards the acquisition of a product, and is expressed by their willingness to pay for it. Both the specific character and possible bases of such preferences are matters of complete indifference on this account of the market: ie there is no concern about either what they are preferences *for*, or what if any *reasons* might support these preferences.

This conception of consumer preferences is sometimes taken to imply that they are to be seen as 'mere' or even 'arbitrary' in character. But this is potentially misleading. The use of such terms would normally imply some contrast with, say, well-founded or reflectively-formed preferences. But consumer preferences are not necessarily 'mere' or 'arbitrary' in this sense, either in (economic) theory or in practice. Rather, the concept of preference should be understood in an essentially neutral or 'agnostic' way, so that it can refer both to 'mere' and 'not mere' preferences, without any distinction being made between these (cf Sheffrin 1978, and Norton 1987, ch. 1).

This use of the concept is related to the way that economists see it as no part of their business to make any 'value-judgments' about consumer preferences - in any way to 'discriminate' between them on the basis of their aesthetic, moral or political character, of the soundness or otherwise of the reasons which may underlie them - or indeed of the extent to which their satisfaction contributes to the consumer's own well-being, a point to which I shall return in the penultimate section.

The refusal to make such judgments is typically justified by an appeal to the methodological ideal of value-freedom or value-neutrality, together with the claim that, to the extent that one is concerned only with constructing predictive and/or explanatory theories of the market, there is no need to discriminate in this way between preferences. But it is often further supported by invoking some form of scepticism about value-judgments: claiming, in effect, that these are purely 'subjective', indeed themselves no more than the expression of (in this case necessarily) 'mere' preferences.

Further, this lack of concern by economic theorists about the possible character and basis of consumer preferences is, as it were, shared by the market itself, according to their account. For in a market system, consumers do not have to provide any rationale for their purchasing decisions, and their access to products is not dependent on any assessment by others of the preferences they expect such products to satisfy. Indeed, that the market is one of the few spheres of social life in which one is not required to render an acceptable account of one's actions may be seen as an additional virtue of it.

What **is** required of consumers, though, is that they should know *what* their preferences are, and *whether* they have been satisfied by a particular purchase. But such knowledge, it is typically assumed - and perhaps necessarily, if the justification for the market noted above is to be plausible - is something of which every consumer is capable. After all, it consists essentially in people's 'first-person' knowledge of their desires, beliefs etc, ie in the kind of knowledge for which everyone has indisputable 'authority' in their own case - perhaps the only kind of knowledge which needs no special structure of social authority to produce or validate. 'It's true because I say it is': this is the authority of the consumer with respect to first-person knowledge claims about their preferences and/or the satisfaction of these. No-one else knows any better, and hence no-one else has the right to challenge

such claims, or to replace them with others 'more' authoritatively made.

But it is precisely the fact that this is pretty much *all* that the consumer is required or expected to know that may well concern those who oppose the subordination of cultural practices to the market, and who regard the forms of social authority required for the integrity of these practices as potentially undermined by the sovereignty of consumers, ie by their ability to determine what is produced on the basis of judgments whose authority holds only with respect to their preferences. In the following section I shall illustrate the nature of such concerns through a particular example. But first I want to contrast this kind of objection to the market with another.

The claim that the market succeeds in maximising the satisfaction of consumer preferences is often criticised on the grounds that, at least in practice, its operation may not achieve this goal. For, alongside more technical issues about 'market failures' in the case of externalities and public goods, it may be argued that there are also many ways in which consumer preferences may fail to control producer decisions - for instance, by the power of producers to prevent or inhibit consumer access to relevant information, or indeed by influencing the character and formation of preferences themselves.

Thus according to this kind of criticism - which has been a central theme in socialist objections to the market, together with issues of distributive justice - the idea of consumer sovereignty is essentially a myth, since market economies leave consumers too vulnerable to the power of producers. By contrast, it seems, the defenders of non-market cultural practices fear that consumer sovereignty might be a reality, which would make cultural 'producers' too vulnerable to the power of consumers - too vulnerable since the only kind of authority that consumers have, ie about their own preferences, may be seen as an inappropriate basis for the control of cultural production. The market thus threatens the authority of cultural practitioners - a characteristically 'conservative' fear, though one that also, I would argue, has a proper home in socialist thought.

### **3 Cultural practices and consumer sovereignty**

To explore what is at issue here, I will now consider the case of a hypothetical university department faced with the kind of quasi-market situation that is increasingly characteristic for higher education institutions in Britain: ie one in which, although students do not (as yet) actually pay for their degree-courses, a significant proportion of the financial resources available to a department depends on its ability to attract students (ie consumers) in competition with other departments elsewhere. Each department's viability thus depends on its relative ability to satisfy the preferences of its student-consumers.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, since this example is drawn from the educational sphere, it is not altogether representative of other kinds of cultural practices: public service broadcasters, for instance, are not vested with the authority to examine or certify their viewers' performance or competence. Nonetheless academics are, inter alia, participants in cultural practices, which have much in common with more typical cases; and I shall try here to abstract from those features of the example specifically related to the validating authority of educational institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> Such fears may of course prove unfounded, if students' preferences are themselves shaped by respect for existing academic authority. Here as throughout I am concerned mainly with the *possible* implications of consumer

A basic concern of academics in this quasi-market situation is, I suggest, typically this: given the potentially arbitrary character of their students' preferences, judged in terms of the criteria internal to the relevant academic discipline, the competitive pressures of the market may lead to a loss of control over what counts as a genuine education in that discipline, and hence in the longer term, over the nature and development of the discipline itself. Hence the authority that they regard themselves as legitimately possessing, with respect to the meaning and character of their intellectual work, is seen as vulnerable to the sovereignty of their newly enthroned consumers.

To illustrate this concern I shall consider two of the most obvious strategies that, say, a department of philosophy might adopt in competing for student-consumers. The first is to adjust the content of its degree courses so as to eliminate those elements which, on past experience, they suspect are unattractive to students, and replace them with others that are less so.

So, for example, the department might abandon its existing requirement for students to take courses in formal logic, introducing in their place an alternative option on reasoning in everyday contexts; and/or it might adjust the content of its courses in continental philosophy, so that, say, the less immediately accessible, metaphysical aspects of Sartre's and Heidegger's work are replaced by a focus on their claims about bad faith, authenticity and 'the human condition'; and similarly oriented changes might be made in other courses.

For the purposes of this discussion, I assume that these changes are made despite being at odds with (members of) the department's own judgments of what is an essential element in the discipline, of what aspects of a philosopher's work must first be grasped if others are to be understood and evaluated, and so on. I am not claiming that in other contexts, there could be no good reason for introducing these particular changes. But here, they are introduced solely to acquire a competitive advantage over other departments, by enhancing its relative ability to meet student preferences.

In this respect, therefore, the department is likely to be seen by others as unscrupulous, opportunistic, lacking in integrity etc. But the nature of the market system is such that they, now placed at a competitive disadvantage, may well be 'forced' to follow suit, unless they display considerable 'altruism': they can no longer afford the costs of acting in accordance with their convictions (cf Keat 1991, and O'Neill 1992). The ethics of their action are thus significantly different from those of the initiating, 'rogue' department; though as the market situation develops over time, it will become increasingly difficult to make such a distinction.

This ethical distinction is related to a more general point about the sense in which, in this kind of competitive situation, cultural producers might see themselves as unduly vulnerable to their consumers. For this vulnerability arises, not directly from the power of consumers, but rather from the willingness of those who will initially be regarded by others as 'rogue' producers to 'confer' this power upon them - by meeting their preferences in ways that other producers had previously been unwilling (and regarded as unjustifiable) to do. It is thus the open-ness of the market to new producers, or to producers with new products, that makes this potential vulnerability

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sovereignty, whose actual effects will depend inter alia on the culturally specific ways in which consumers conceive of their relations with producers, discussed elsewhere in this volume.

realisable.

There is, however, a second competitive strategy available here. This is to develop a degree that appeals to a specific section of the 'market' (in a different sense of this term) for philosophy, rather than trying to compete with others in catering for the 'general' student's preferences. Indeed ideally this group of potential students will be one that no other, rival department is targeting, since the rationale for this strategy is typically to **avoid** direct competition - though there is no guarantee that this can be sustained over time, since direct competitors may re-emerge, and the department will find itself either forced back on the first strategy, or needing to find a different, and possibly more specialised market niche.

For example, a department might reckon that there is an untapped demand for a philosophy degree that consists entirely of practical ethics, with an array of courses on medical and business ethics, environmental issues, animal rights, and so on; or for a degree which caters for Channel 4 viewers who find contemporary developments in post-structuralist philosophy and the aesthetics of post-modernist architecture especially exciting, with courses on the history of philosophy seen through exclusively Nietzschean eyes; or for one that appeals to students with an interest in humanistic psychology and 60s-style counter-culture, who already believe that all forms of mind-body dualism are misconceived, and will go elsewhere if this belief is not reflected in their courses.

Again, I assume here that these degree-schemes are regarded as philosophically illegitimate by the department that introduces them. Yet it may find itself in a situation where its inability to enforce its own authoritative judgments about the nature of the discipline make this perceived loss of integrity difficult to avoid. It thus finds itself losing control over the nature of the 'product' that it has to offer. And it resents the fact that control is being ceded to those whose preferences for certain kinds of philosophical products it regards as having no authority. On this anti-market view the student is, after all, seen essentially as an *apprentice*, not as a sovereign consumer; as someone who is required to accept the authority of this cultural practice's members as a condition of entry into it.

However, as soon as one presents such concerns about the possible effects of the market in these terms - of 'losing control over the nature of the product' etc - one is bound to be struck by how odd it would be if similar concerns were (at least openly) expressed by commercial firms operating in a standard market situation.<sup>9</sup> Why is this so? And more importantly, are there any good grounds for distinguishing the two cases so radically, so that the former concerns are justifiable whilst the latter are not? In the next section I will present one possible way of giving a positive answer to this question. But first I will introduce an additional element to the philosophy example.

So far I have been assuming that philosophy is a single, relatively monolithic academic discipline, in the sense of there being a strong degree of consensus amongst its practitioners about, for example, what counts as a genuinely philosophical problem, what would constitute a possible solution to such a problem, the canon of philosophical

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that commercial producers never 'think' in such ways about their consumers, only that the theory (and ideology) of the free market renders such thoughts unacceptable - and market mechanisms are intended to render them ineffectual.

texts, the ways in which the different specialised areas within 'the' discipline relate to one another, and so on. Yet this is far from actually being the case - even if one puts aside the existence of differing 'national traditions'. (In this respect philosophy is, at least nowadays, like many other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, and many non-academic cultural practices - though arguably unlike the natural sciences).

There is, in other words, a certain kind of plurality 'within' philosophy, which means that there is no single, agreed set of authoritative judgments about the proper nature of this form of intellectual enquiry, and hence about what constitutes a proper education in it. This is not to say that there is no actual or possible dialogue between these various 'schools' or conceptions of philosophy; nor that philosophers are themselves pluralists, in the sense that they all agree on the desirability of this situation. But this fact of plurality does complicate my earlier account of the two competitive strategies since, roughly speaking, what is a 'rogue department' from one philosophical standpoint may be an exemplary department from another; and what some philosophers see as the unprincipled exploitation of a market niche may seem to others the fortunate existence of a market for their particular conception of philosophy.

Further, anyone who regarded such plurality as itself desirable might regard the 'the subordination of philosophy to the market' as a useful way in which this pluralistic ideal could be realised, with each conception of philosophy establishing its own niche market amongst the plurality of consumers which is itself, according to some social theorists, an increasingly evident feature of contemporary, 'post-modern', societies. Thus, far from being seen as a threat to the authority of the discipline's practitioners, this pluralised form of consumer sovereignty would serve to undermine the imperialistic tendencies of any one conception of philosophy; and it might be especially attractive to those whose own conception of the discipline was at present marginalised by its dominant form.

But this kind of optimism - or opportunism - about the market might well prove illusory. First, there is no guarantee of a correspondence between the plurality of consumer groups and that of conceptions of philosophy: such a pre-established harmony could arise only if conceptions of philosophy were themselves directly consumer-generated. Second, and more importantly, there is nothing to prevent the problems noted earlier for the first competitive strategy being reproduced for the practitioners of each of these different 'philosophies', since they cannot prevent what **they** would regard as 'rogue' producers competing 'unscrupulously' with them in what had initially been their own market niche.

Thus even a pluralistic view of philosophy will still involve claims to authority on the part of each group of practitioners within the overall plurality. *Their* internal standards of judgment etc may not be shared by other philosophers; but they may well, like them, find themselves wanting to reject the sovereignty of their consumer-students. (Post-modernist academics, beware!). The pluralists' rejection of monolithic authority does not imply the rejection of authority tout court.

#### **4 Cultural practices, well-being and scepticism**

But even if cultural practitioners are right to regard the market as threatening the integrity of their practices for the kinds of reasons just presented, this does not by itself establish the case for forms of public support that

would protect these from the unregulated effects of market forces.<sup>10</sup> To show this one must also present some positive justification for the existence of such practices - over and above, that is, the benefits that may accrue to their own members. I will now sketch out one such possible justification, and consider the bearing upon this of the issues about scepticism and authority explored earlier.<sup>11</sup>

Cultural practices, I suggest, can be justified in terms of their potential contribution to the *well-being* of what I shall term their 'audiences' (ie viewers, listeners, students, visitors, spectators etc). The well-being of individuals may be thought of as consisting in the extent to which they are able to realise their own *conceptions of the good*, ie to live in a way that conforms to their sense or judgment of what is valuable, worthwhile, desirable, fulfilling and so on.<sup>12</sup> Further, such conceptions of the good are rarely homogeneous: they typically include a variety of heterogeneous 'goods', of different kinds of activities, relationships, experiences etc with distinct, and possibly incommensurable values.

If public support for non-market cultural practices is to be justified in terms of their contribution to human well-being thus conceived, it must first be shown that such well-being may at least arguably consist in something more and/or other than the satisfaction of consumer-preferences - assuming, for these purposes, that the market is the most efficient way of achieving *this* aim. This does not mean showing that consumer satisfactions make **no** contribution to human well-being; only that they may perfectly well not be the sole such contributors.

But this should be a fairly easy task. First, one should remember that at best, the market only maximises the satisfaction of consumer preferences 'as they happen to be', ie whether or not they involve the kinds of critical or reflective processes upon which, ideally, individuals might wish to base their judgments of what is valuable to them. Second, there is considerable empirical evidence that people's sense of their own well-being is not directly and positively correlated with the extent to which their preferences as consumers have been satisfied (see Sagoff 1988 ch.5).

Finally, it seems clear that a central concern for many people is precisely with how large a part should be played in their lives by the pursuit of consumer satisfactions - as compared, for instance, with the value of friendships and family relationships, engagement in political or community activities, and so on (see Anderson 1990). This concern would make no sense - and my argument requires only that it should be intelligible - if human well-being and consumer-satisfaction were wholly and unarguably identical with one another.

Turning now to the potential contribution of cultural practices to well-being thus defined, one can note, first, that the quite commonplace concern just described is one that may itself be addressed in their various 'products' - in novels, soap operas, philosophical treatises and the like. And it seems plausible to argue that, both in this case

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<sup>10</sup> What forms such support or protection might take is an issue I shall not consider here.

<sup>11</sup> The following account draws on the work of several social philosophers who have recently tried, in effect, to develop a version of Aristotelian ethics consistent with certain features of modern liberalism - eg Kymlicka (1989), O'Neill (1993) and Raz (1986), especially ch. 12 - together with that of MacIntyre (1981). All reject a purely 'want-regarding' conception of well-being: see Barry (1965).

<sup>12</sup> This may or may not include a concern with the well-being of others: my account is neutral on this question, though I believe such concerns form part of most people's conceptions of the good.

and more generally, people's ability to develop their own sense of what is valuable, and of the relative value of different life-activities, will be enhanced by their access to cultural practices in which the tensions and conflicts between various conceptions of the good for humans, and hence of their well-being, are thematised and explored in both discursive and non-discursive forms. To deny this would be to assume that individuals' conceptions of the good are best developed in a social and cultural vacuum, an assumption supported only by the most extreme and implausible forms of individualism.

Second, and perhaps more typically, cultural practices may be seen as attempts to sustain and develop specific 'forms of the good', ie forms of experience and activity which may constitute at least part of what their audiences come to regard as valuable, fulfilling, and so on. That is, cultural practices themselves embody (and often in a 'pluralistic' manner - cf the previous section) various conceptions of the good; and so they collectively provide, as it were, a sourcebook for ways of understanding and practising what may be of value to human lives, and which, through their audiences' access to them, may thus contribute to the latter's well-being.

This does not imply that cultural practitioners are primarily motivated by their desire to contribute in these ways to the well-being of their audiences - as if they were 'cultural altruists', sacrificing their own interests to the task of providing others with ways of understanding and exploring the nature of the good for humans. My argument here is compatible with a variety and mixture of practitioner motivations, including straightforward enjoyment of their engagement in the cultural practice concerned, some belief in its value - that it may well constitute some part of the good for humans - and indeed, a recognition that the practice is itself radically incomplete in the absence of an audience.<sup>13</sup> But this does not mean that their primary aim is to enhance the good of others.

Neither does this justification for the support of non-market cultural practices imply their members being invested with the authority to determine what the good for humans consists in, or to legislate for others how their well-being is to be achieved. Rather, the account that I have outlined is quite consistent with the *autonomy* of all those concerned, ie with the moral 'right' of individuals to decide for themselves their own conceptions of the good, and hence what their well-being may involve. Indeed it is arguable that such autonomy, if it is thought of as something more than the mere ability of individuals to say 'this is what I think', or 'this is what I value', itself requires access to the substantive possibilities of the human good, and the resources for reflection upon these, that can be provided by a flourishing range of cultural practices (see Kymlicka 1989).

The authority required here is of a different kind (cf Winch 1965). Consider, say, the (highly pluralistic) cultural practice of music. My argument does not imply that musical practitioners should have the right to 'tell' their potential audiences that a life without (this form of) music is not worth living, nor the authority to prescribe, for example, what part such music should play in people's lives. Their authority is, rather, of an 'internal' nature: it concerns their special relationship to the concepts, criteria and skills involved in the practice, and their acquired ability to evaluate particular attempts to realise these, and hence at least implicitly to determine what count as genuine, admirable etc instances of the practice. Such authority is not, of course, unchallengeable, either internally or externally; nor is it one that cannot or should not be shared in certain ways with an audience. But it is difficult

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<sup>13</sup> My remarks about practitioner-audience relationships are deliberately, though unfortunately, highly abstract: for useful antidotes, see Ang (1991) and Mulgan ed (1990).

to envisage any cultural practice without it; and if the argument in the preceding section is plausible, such authority is always potentially vulnerable to the effects of the market.

Furthermore, I suggest, if potential audiences are to benefit from their access to cultural practices, they need to approach them in a way that at least initially recognises such authority, since they will otherwise not be in a position to understand, and hence judge for themselves, its possible value to them, nor to enjoy the specific human good it may represent. In other words, a certain attitude or mode of engagement is required - which is not to say that it can or should be *enforced*. This is not an attitude of deference or passivity, but of (potentially critical) respect; without it, there is nothing that can be learnt, and hence little that can be enjoyed.<sup>14</sup> The market can in no way be relied upon to encourage or sustain such an attitude amongst consumers, at least partly because it often gives rise to justifiable suspicions amongst them about the integrity of producers, though it does not necessarily prevent its existence.

To illustrate what is involved here - and to reinforce my earlier account of the typical concerns of cultural practitioners about consumer sovereignty - one can consider the partly analogous case of tourism, where 'another culture' is the equivalent of a cultural practice. Of course, there are disanalogies between the two cases, including the 'non-voluntariness' of members' involvement in their own culture, which provide additional reasons for the tourist's 'respecting the authority' of the visited culture's members. But, putting aside these specifically moral considerations, it can be argued that a certain mode of engagement with another culture is necessary if its potential to enrich or develop one's own conception of the good, and hence potentially one's own well-being, is to be realised.

For example, it should not be approached exclusively as a means of satisfying an existing set of preferences, whose content and rationale bear no relation to the 'local' meanings and values of that culture, and which are not open to reflective change as a result of this encounter (cf Norton 1987 on 'transformative values'). Further, some attempt must be made to comprehend it 'in its own terms', rather than simply to impose or project upon it a prior set of meanings, or to constitute it as meaning whatever it is that comes into one's head, and so on. And clearly, 'unscrupulous producers', eg tour operators and local businesses, can all too easily act in ways that are destructive of the culture, by empowering tourist-consumers to treat it not in its own terms, but as the object of their 'arbitrary' preferences. For preferences, in effect, serve to define the meanings of their objects, not merely to select between objects independently defined: the only relevant features of their objects are those picked out, or even created, by preferences, and hence by consumers.

Following through this proposed analogy, one can then move on from 'other cultures' to 'popular' culture; to sports, festivals and games; to broadcasting and the media; and then on to the arts, academic disciplines and 'high' culture. By putting these kinds of cultural practices in this particular (rhetorical) order I am trying to suggest that the argument I have presented is not just another conservative plea for the protection of high culture against the incursions of mass culture; and likewise, that the kind of authority of cultural practitioners which I am

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<sup>14</sup> This argument for 'the right mode of engagement' needs to be complemented by an account of how cultural practitioners should conduct themselves if they are to merit such respect; and my argument here should not be taken to imply that actual cultural practitioners typically do so.

defending is not open to the charges of elitism considered earlier.

## 5 Scepticism and the market

But what of the *sceptical* challenge to any forms of authority that depend on claims to knowledge or judgment whose possible justification the sceptic denies? Although the argument for non-market cultural practices that I have presented does not involve attributing to cultural practitioners authority with respect to the good or well-being of others, a thorough-going scepticism would undermine this argument at various points.

First, scepticism in its extreme, individual-subjectivist form, would rule out even the 'internal' authority of practitioners' judgments within each cultural practice. Indeed, it is probably incompatible with any mode of social practice - though this may not be so of more moderate forms of pluralistic, socially-grounded relativism. Second, scepticism about the interpretation of meanings is broadly antithetical to the 'mode of engagement' which, I suggested, is necessary if cultural practices are to contribute to their audience's potential well-being. For if there is no way of showing that one account of a cultural object's meaning is better justified than another - if 'anything goes' when it comes to interpretation, and hence understanding - the idea of respect for a cultural practice loses its basis.

Finally, the concept of autonomy is also undermined by scepticism, since it reduces people's conception of the good, and hence also their judgments of their own well-being, to the expressions of unjustifiable, arbitrary preferences. It is thus unable to make sense of, for example, the ways in which individuals see themselves as *learning* through their experience of different conceptions of the good, and hence as replacing their previous beliefs by others which they come to regard as better justified. Thus, far from scepticism providing support for autonomy (as it is sometimes thought to), by protecting individuals from the supposedly 'coercive' possibility that their own beliefs might be mistaken, whilst those of others are correct, it instead renders unintelligible what is presupposed by autonomous judgment.

But although in these ways scepticism undermines the kind of justification for non-market cultural practices I have presented, it does not follow that scepticism provides positive support for the use of the market in these or other areas. Meta-ethical subjectivism, for example, as a purely epistemological thesis, is arguably consistent with **any** substantive ethical or political positions, including many that would be highly antithetical to 'market' values.

However, if one moves from this strictly philosophical level of analysis to consider how sceptical beliefs may actually operate in specific cultural contexts, the situation is more complex. For nowadays, I suspect, the adoption of such scepticism is typically associated with - even, though mistakenly, thought to support - a kind of 'tolerant', loosely 'democratic' standpoint, according to which 'no-one has the right to impose their views on anyone else' (since none can be justified anyway), and 'everyone's values should be given equal status'.

And from this standpoint, the market is bound to seem an attractive means of making social decisions about what kinds of goods and services are to be produced, even if it is not necessarily the only means - provided, of course, that it works as its neo-classical proponents say it does, and one ignores inequalities of wealth and power. For if there are no 'objective' ways of judging the value of such products, what 'fairer' solution is there than to

allow them to be judged by their consumers' preferences (ie by **their** value-judgments)? All that such consumers need to know is their own desires; and their first-person authority with respect to these - their authority as consumers - is the only kind that is likely to survive the sceptical attacks which undermine the forms of authority that would be necessary for at least some, and possibly any, alternative, non-market means of economic organisation.

This line of thought is far from conclusive, but neither is it altogether implausible. More importantly, perhaps, it has a powerful contemporary appeal. Here I return to some of my remarks at the outset of this paper. Those who celebrate the advent of post-modern society tend to value such phenomena as the 'transgression' of previously accepted, and authoritatively 'enforced' boundaries; the displacement of serious, fixed and authorial meanings by the playful fluidity of readers' meanings; and so on. This does not, in logic, commit them to a celebration of the market. Yet arguably in reality this is indeed their greatest ally - the most powerful transgressor of boundaries, the most active dissolver of meanings, the most radical challenger of social authority.<sup>15</sup>

It is for such reasons that conservatives have always viewed the effects of the unbridled market with such concern. But whilst socialists have been happy to accept the destructive effects of the market on certain (typically pre-modern, hierarchical) forms of authority, their egalitarian conception of human well-being has also required, if not the elimination of the market, then at least the construction of clear boundaries around it, and the flourishing of social practices which can only be sustained by non-individualistic (yet autonomy-enhancing) patterns of authority.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, of course, it may be argued that the market only has such effects when it is itself allied with independently generated processes of cultural change.

<sup>16</sup> Thus here as elsewhere socialism and conservatism have much in common: see Keat (1981). On the problem of market boundaries, see Walzer (1983) ch.4, Anderson (1990) and Keat (1993).

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