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Robert Feleppa

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Review of Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy. By Michele M. Moody-Adams

Robert Feleppa
Wichita State University, robert.feleppa@wichita.edu

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BOOK REVIEWS

Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy. By Michele M. Moody-Adams. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. Pp. x + 260.

In this ambitious book, Moody-Adams aims to establish, as she says, “a plausible conception of moral objectivity” and to defend “a cautious optimism that moral philosophy can be an aid in serious, everyday moral inquiry” (1). This requires defeating an unjustified skepticism about the objectivity of moral theory engendered by, first, fundamental misunderstandings of the structure and purpose of ethical theory and, second, unjustified acceptance of various forms of moral relativism. The misunderstanding of ethical theory she attributes in large part to a “pervasive deference to natural science,” which inclines philosophers to mistakenly fault ethical theory for failing to meet epistemological standards appropriate to science and not to ethics (1). Meanwhile, relativism’s unjustified and harmful influence she attributes primarily to a notion of “culture” as a self-contained system that is resistant to the criticism and understanding of outsiders. The notion is not supported, she argues, by a consideration of ethnographic practice and, moreover, makes the very possibility of ethnography inexplicable. Her own position, which she terms “critical pluralism,” views ethics as primarily concerned with self-scrutiny and burdens the moral philosopher with gaining an interpretive understanding of our culturally informed self-conceptions. Thus moral philosophy must draw more than it typically does on a finer-grained analysis – or “thick description” (following Clifford Geertz and Michael Walzer) – of the social contexts in which ethical issues arise. Moral philosophy is less akin to science and more akin to “fieldwork in familiar places.” Her book exemplifies this analysis in that she engages “in what can be called ‘fieldwork’ in the complex intellectual culture from which all these misconceptions emerge: a scrutiny of the shared beliefs, assumptions, and methods of argument that underwrite contemporary skepticism about moral objectivity and moral inquiry” (2). She takes on an impressively large array of divergent viewpoints in moral theory and argues for a kind of middle way: while she views the kind of moral theory done by many influential professional philosophers as both wrong-headed and irrelevant to the concerns of the broader community of moral inquirers, she is quite adamant in rejecting the “antitheory” extreme as well. She finds the core of truth in the antitheory position to be the rejection of certain predominant views of

philosophical theorizing, not the rejection of philosophical theorizing *tout court*.

Culture, History, and Relativism

One of her major concerns is to attack a thesis on which many forms of normative and metaethical relativism rest, namely, “descriptive cultural relativism” (which I here abbreviate DCR), which exaggerates, with pernicious consequences, the degree and depth of difference of moral opinion that actually exists. Specifically, DCR is the thesis that “differences in the moral practices of diverse social groups generate ‘ultimate’ or ‘fundamental’ moral disputes, disputes that are neither reducible to non-moral disagreement nor susceptible of rational resolution – disputes, that is, that are in principle irresolvable” (15). Her attack focuses both on assumptions that make the thesis questionable and on the alarming impact of relativism on philosophical discussion and political and social processes. Relativism in her view underwrites a pernicious “moral isolationism” that seals off those practices from moral evaluation by outsiders. She is also concerned that it threatens a dangerous “collapse of moral self-confidence” in contexts in which the risks of critique and protest must be countered by firm moral convictions (197f.), on the one hand, yet can also undermine the open dialogue between conflicting viewpoints and the “readiness to engage in unself-righteous comparisons of ways of life” on which liberal democracies depend, on the other (27f.). Throughout the book she calls attention to relativist isolationism’s tendencies to create argumentative impasses in discussions of moral theory and controversial social policy issues such as abortion and educational multiculturalism.

Two key underlying questionable assumptions about “cultures” are that they are “internally integrated wholes” and that they are “fundamentally self-contained and isolable set[s] of practices and beliefs” (21). While relativists typically emphasize the impact of cultural conditioning on thought and behavior, and make much of cross-cultural differences in belief, the ethnographic work that underlies DCR presupposes a degree of comparability that precludes the cultural isolation they advocate. Indeed, for all their emphasis on conceptual difference and disagreement, they ultimately do not really, she remarks, “take disagreement seriously.” This remark signals a number of related problems plaguing not only relativisms that emphasize contemporaneous cultural differences, but also those that emphasize differences caused by historical distance. These points are articulated over the course of detailed discussions of the ethnographic work of figures such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits, and Geertz and the metaethical views of philosophers such as Michael Slote, Richard Rorty, and Bernard Williams.

This critique draws in part on well-known criticisms of traditional ethnographic methodology voiced by anthropologists, feminists, and

others concerning generalizations from a restricted base of informants. The result has been that the views of certain groups have been taken as authoritative while viewpoints of other, often subordinate or oppressed groups have not. Moody-Adams maintains that inadequate attention to these differences of view seriously underdetermines relativist claims to have identified a stable belief system. These claims are further underdetermined by the fact that context-variant “situational meanings” constitute the significance of actors’ actions and utterances. Moreover, the asserted contrasts with “western” meanings, opinions, and sensibilities involve similarly questionable assumptions of uniformity of contrasting meaning and opinion, when in fact westerners often have views similar to those of members of the cultures under study. In short, DCR founders on a false notion of “cultural integration”: the complexity and inscrutability of cultural belief do not support the cognitive and moral exclusivity that relativists impute to differing ways of life. The natural consequence of these problems is the so-called “Rashomon effect” – that is, the conflicting interpretations often produced by anthropologists studying the same societies.

Problems for claims of cultural uniqueness and exclusivity are further compounded, she argues, by the fact that the very effort to organize a society by reference to a *system* of beliefs creates an unjustifiably *static* picture of those beliefs, artificially compressing ongoing complex processes of moral development into an “ethnographic present.” Indeed, the very idea of self-contained culture rests on “a profoundly ahistorical view of the nature and development of cultures” (52). These difficulties are further compounded by an attitude that the internal structure of a culture may not be known even to its insiders. For example, she faults Mead’s insistence that ethnographers work “within a frame of reference that recognizes the internal consistency of the premises of each human culture and also recognizes that much of this consistency is unconscious, that is, not available to the average member of the culture” (72). Moreover, the quest for culturally or circumscribed and unique systems obscures important factors in the dynamic development and interaction of cultures.

In short, she sees DCR as an artifact of a generally inadequate explanatory fiction. What’s more, this fiction is often given an unjustified causal status in explanations of behavior. That is, the insulating assumptions about culture are often linked to a problematic *cultural determinism* which attributes too much causal influence to a society’s conventions and overlooks the critically important ways in which individuals *modify* and *adapt* cultural practices – something on which a culture’s very survival depends. In this connection she applies a well-known metaphor of Neurath’s of sailors repairing a vessel while sailing in it: “Since the evaluating self is always constituted – at least in part – by desires, values, and purposes under evaluation, one can examine one’s most fundamental constitutive ends only one ‘plank’ at a time. But a culture that worked to impair capacities for self-evaluation and self-correction would be creating the conditions for its own

demise” (83). In addition to external environmental pressures, there are many ways in which the influence of culture is mediated by individual experiences and choices and by the concrete dynamics of institutions. Cultural determinism is also challenged, she argues, by abundant evidence that people, even in “primitive” societies, have the requisite “conceptual space” for questioning the morality of their practices. This requires only that there be a group relatively disadvantaged by the practices in question and that there be good reason to think that those who enjoy the benefits of those practices would not have chosen to be among those who are severely disadvantaged by them.

Perhaps her most compelling antirelativist argument rests on what she terms a “proto-Davidsonian view of moral interpretation,” namely, that “moral disagreement is possible only where there is quite substantial agreement about many of the basic concepts that are relevant to moral reflection” (55). Moreover, she concurs with Davidson’s thesis that extreme relativisms make interpretation and ethnography impossible. In the context of an illuminating discussion of Evans-Pritchard, Adams calls our attention to a very serious and often discussed tension in anthropology and history between the desire to describe what is unique to a culture and the desire, at the same time, to make that culture comprehensible to an anthropological audience.

Aside from these various explanatory hurdles, she finds an ironic cultural imperialism embedded in the relativists’ ostensible efforts to defeat just that. These concerns are eloquently expressed in the following passage:

contemporary survivals of the distancing devices that are implicit in Evans-Pritchard’s advice to historians . . . encourage a new kind of exoticism, on which the living cultures of non-industrialized societies become little more than artifacts in a kind of culture museum. This exoticism occasionally gives rise to interventionist efforts to preserve traditional societies from cultural change, where the principal motivation for such efforts is the desire to preserve for “us” (inhabitants of industrialized societies) some living specimens of a simpler, “nobler” existence. In such circumstances, relativism and its analogues – far from being respectful antidotes to cultural imperialism and ethnocentrism – give rise to a new kind of cultural imperialism. Instead of “giving permission” to cultural diversity and difference, these views simply refuse to allow others the prerogative of cultural self-definition. (73f.)

Moody-Adams takes particular exception to the accusations of what is typically termed “presentism” leveled by historical-distance relativists against those who criticize the past practices of their own societies – for example, the practice of slavery. Slote, Williams, and Rorty mistakenly attribute its persistence to one form or another of cognitive incapacity to recognize, or to act on the recognition of, injustice, or else they make whiggish claims to the effect that contemporary society has discovered or

realized moral truths that past societies could not. Indeed, she is adamant in rejecting the idea that ethical theories make discoveries of genuine novelty. Instead, we should consider slavery's acceptance as the result of what Aquinas termed the "affected ignorance" of those who perpetuated it (101f.). This is more a matter of simply choosing to remain uninformed about the nature or occurrence of unjust practices or refusing to acknowledge the moral relevance of the unjust acts of which one is aware.

Reason, Objectivity, and Value

Her second major theme is a critique of the perceived limitations of rational argument to reconcile ethical disputes. As with her other main theme, Moody-Adams evaluates a fairly wide range of literature, and as before I shall select only a few cases to illustrate her general strategy. First, she takes issue with the belief that there are deep and rationally *unresolvable* moral disagreements and with the related misunderstanding of the varied forms that agreement and resolution take in ethics, many of which do not require *convergence* in ethical belief. While the inability to resolve disagreement is a typical weapon in the arsenal of relativism and ethical antirealism, she is equally adamant in faulting Isaiah Berlin's and related pluralist conceptions of value which embrace irresolvable disagreement as essential to a mature ethics and precisely the thing that makes political freedom valuable. She attacks the assumed connection between rational resolution and convergence on the grounds that stable resolutions of ethical disputes can take the form of agreeing to disagree, coming to a deeper understanding of opposed positions, and attaining a deeper appreciation of the nature and import of one's own moral convictions. She does admit that there are contexts in which disagreement is plainly incompatible with any sense of moral resolution, but argues that the inference from these sorts of cases to unresolvability in principle is a non sequitur. She grants that emotivism would avoid this problem if it could coherently unpack intuitions about the conative character of evaluation which motivate it; but after consideration of the representative views of A. J. Ayer, Charles Stevenson, and David Wong, she concludes that they succumb either to familiar objections concerning their inability to explain disagreement and inference in ethics or to the charge of invoking problematic notions of cultural self-containment.

Moody-Adams is also concerned that typical attitudes about the nature of ethical theory misconstrue the relationship between theory and experience. She takes particular exception to Quine's views about ethics, which she locates among those which claim that moral theory cannot select "some action or policy as the unique solution to particular cases of disagreement – and, more generally [cannot select] some morally best way of life" – because "there is no reliable, objective method for testing the claims of moral theories" (130). In this vein, she quotes Quine as follows:

“The empirical foothold of scientific theory is in the predicted, observable event; that of a moral code is in the observable moral act. But whereas we can test a prediction against the independent course of observable nature, we can judge the morality of an act only by our moral standards themselves” (130; cf. Quine 1981, 63). This inclines Quine, as she notes, to embrace Stevenson’s view that all that is left is to resort to persuasion if moral disagreement extends “irreducibly to ultimate ends” (131).

Her critique is aimed not only at Quine’s efforts to establish epistemic discontinuity between science and ethics, but also at contrary efforts to establish continuity by emphasizing Kuhnian views of the dependence of evidence on theory or the epistemic parallels between observation in science and such notions as the “contents of conscience,” “moral facts,” “intuitions,” and “moral experience” in ethics. She believes that the failure of such strategies is amply illustrated by their failure to offer any definitive resolution of conflict, as is evidenced by the deeply conflicting ways Rawls’s reflections on the Original Position in *A Theory of Justice* and Nozick’s Lockean genetic account of the state in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* unpack the intuition that it is wrong to treat people merely as means to social ends. Moreover, scientific distortion is also manifest in the fact that typically the intuitions and convictions to which philosophers appeal and which they assume are shared by the community of moral inquirers are instead deeply informed by the philosophers’ special theoretical interests: they are quite different and (much as in the case of the misguided relativist ethnographer) there is far less agreement in the community’s convictions than is typically supposed. This in turn is linked with an excessive preoccupation with the blanket validation of ethical methods and other abstract problems that she believes only diminishes the relevance of moral philosophy.

Another important disanalogy with science, she argues, is that the moral community is not a community of experts, since it includes all reflective human beings. Thus, “even the most sophisticated normative moral theory . . . can never be more than a species of a familiar genus: the critical, sometimes unsystematic reflection that lived human experience constantly renders unavoidable” (135f.). To view moral problems as well-defined problems or puzzles to be approached by relatively context-free decision procedures is similarly wrong-headed and threatens to “sever the crucial link with the concerns that give particular problems their distinctive character as *moral* problems” (136). Quoting Putnam, she remarks, “The very words *solution* and *problem* may be leading us astray – ethical ‘problems’ are not like scientific problems, and they often do not have ‘solutions’ in the sense that scientific problems do” (144; Putnam 1990, 180–81). With Putnam, she favors replacing the problem-solving metaphor with one emphasizing *adjudication*, and employing concepts “rooted in disagreements about how to interpret important ingredients of a shared life” (147).

What theories such as Rawls’s do, she contends, is demonstrate a valuable

philosophical skill at articulating alternative interpretations of moral experience and stimulating the moral imagination through the construction of such thought experiments. Where convergence of moral opinion is a desideratum, this imaginative capacity, as well as the philosopher's respect for standards of reasonableness in argument, is of great value to ethical discourse, enabling discussions to go beyond the restrictions of existing conceptions. For example, the "moral language of rights" does much in her view to restrict progress in discussions of abortion, and she contends that the "process of imaginative reinterpretation will require all the parties to contemporary disputes about abortion, in particular, to engage in the kind of scrutiny of settled convictions that few, so far, have been willing to make" (120). She makes particularly clear the harmful practical effects of the acknowledgment of rational unresolvability of dispute here in allowing disputants "to evade their responsibilities for moral self-scrutiny" (121).

The centrality of self-scrutiny and self-reform in her view of ethics lies at the heart of many of her criticisms, from her attack on cultural determinism to her attack on scientific value theory. It also forms the core of her constructive account of moral philosophy. In her view the proper empirical foothold of ethics "is the self-understanding of the community of moral inquirers potentially addressed by the inquiry," and ethical theory must then articulate "the complex self-conceptions of those embroiled in the debate or addressed by the theory" (138). It is here that one sees the place of appeals to prereflective intuitions – not as an analog of scientific evidence, but as essential for making the necessary impact on the self-conceptions of the theorist's audience: "Moral theory must start from the 'inside': from the pre-theoretical deliverances of the moral consciousness of those to whom the theory is addressed" (140). Contemplating a moral theory and bringing it to bear on action and experience is not an exercise in seeking confirmation or disconfirmation of a theory, but a process whereby one comes to "reorder the settled convictions that one brings to its contemplation; in so doing, it will effect at least some change in the structure and content of self-understandings" (141). Indeed, it is the fact that the required self-revision can require such a comprehensive and difficult change in attitudes that explains the deep disagreements one finds in ethics.

Moody-Adams's view of ethics is deeply influenced by the work of Walzer and Geertz, both of whom emphasize, in their respective contexts of interest, the need for thick description. The relativism that Geertz and others tie to thick description is not a problem, she believes, once DCR's questionable assumptions are properly understood. Conceptions can never be so thick that no cultural outsider can make adequate use of them. The main similarities with Walzer lie in a common emphasis on internal interpretive understanding of ethical contexts. She also looks favorably on Walzer's insistence that more attention be given to what he terms "workmanlike"

theory – that operant in the particular and often personally risky social and political struggles of members of excluded or oppressed groups. She also joins Walzer in denying that moral theory issues in genuine moral innovation or discovery, agreeing that the “prophetic critics” who effectively promote significant social change do so “not by moral invention or moral discovery but by reinterpretation of moral concepts and values already shared in the society under scrutiny” (106). (She supports this in part by offering some illuminating reflections on some traditional and ostensibly noninterpretive moral theories, which, she argues, actually are interpretive articulations of existing moral concepts.) What she rejects in Walzer is his view that interpretive ethnography should entirely replace moral philosophy; rather, the latter should become more plainly committed to articulating multivocal first-person moral conflict.

Rawls’s theory of justice exemplifies many of the themes she advances. She finds especially attractive his gradual divergence from traditional epistemology and metaphysics to a view of justification concerned with the “practical social task” of attaining overlapping political consensus – thus “subtly reaffirming Dewey’s conception of moral philosophy as a contribution to the collective self-scrutiny of the culture from which it emerges, rather than the principal authoritative source of decisions about how, and whether, a moral conception is justified” (172; see Rawls 1980, 517–19; 1985; 1994). There is still an important role for philosophical justification in that Rawls’s reflective equilibrium account doesn’t just summarize current considered convictions, but, like any codification, clarifies and makes more coherent, keeping and refining certain intuitions in the process while rejecting others. This calls for rational justification, but, again, with the appropriate comprehension of context.

Moral Objectivity and Quine Revisited

This is an ambitious and important book. It covers a remarkable range of issues and literature, only a small portion of which I have considered here. Yet one is never lost in the complexity, as Moody-Adams’s exposition is deftly organized around the two main themes I have indicated. The critique of DCR is especially effective, but her broad critique of ethical theory moves rather quickly in places, and those who adhere to the various positions she criticizes may find it easy to articulate counterarguments she has not considered. However, the core problems on which she focuses are deep, pervasive, and thought-provoking, and readers will seldom find it difficult to flesh out her position for themselves. Here I will direct my remarks to concerns bearing on her primary objective, noted at the outset, of supporting “a plausible conception of moral objectivity.”

Her worry is that critics of ethical rationality are learning the wrong lesson. They argue that ethics is not objective, but they prove, to her mind, only that they are applying the wrong standards of objectivity: different

aspirations, different notions of objectivity. Still, one might ask, Why insist on objectivity at all? Her view is that what is central and common to scientific and ethical objectivity is that agreement not be *coerced*. She cites an argument by Williams that the value of observational tests in science also lies in their being a basis for uncoerced agreement. Still, one might object that this is quite consistent with the idea of abandoning objectivity in ethics. Why not simply hinge one's case for noncoercive agreement on its social and political merits?

Moody-Adams rests some of her case for ethical objectivity on the undesirable practical effects of challenging it or attempting to replace it with something else, perhaps Rorty's notion of solidarity. Yet while one should worry about the implicit threats to our native hue of resolution, I don't think she has made a full enough case against Rorty or like-minded people here on this score. Are we sure that the needed motivation will be lacking or that ethnocentrism will necessarily work against our capacity to have an open-minded appreciation of the other side? The desire to recognize differences, to prevent unnecessary conflict, and so forth can be attributed to factors such as the recognition by all sides in disputes of their common humanity.

Supposing a compelling case could be made against Rorty, more consideration must also be given to Quine's general line of criticism, despite Moody-Adams's insightful critique of his position. If the "methodological infirmity" thesis is trimmed down to its basic claim, free of emotivist trappings, it is the claim that nature provides a neutral and noncoercive arbiter of scientific disagreement, whereas in ethics we don't have anything comparable. Quine is not asking for an empirical test of ethics; he is asking for something that exercises the same degree of independent control over belief – independent, that is, of the processes of enculturation.

Quine's support of Stevensonian noncognitivism is, as Moody-Adams notes, problematic. Indeed, he invites many of the objections she brings to bear against noncognitivism, particularly the trouble it has making sense of ethical disagreement. These problems are especially troubling for Quine given his commitments to two-valued logic and truth-conditional semantics. These introduce strong cognitivist elements into his position and provide good reason for a selective reading that brackets the emotivism while still retaining the important epistemological insight. (For an excellent account of these problems, see Shockley 1998.)

His epistemological point in articulating the concept of observation sentences is to show how theory is attached by, as he calls it, a "towline" to nature – or, varying the metaphor, how we can view observation sentences as "anchored to sensory neural intake irrespective of their theoretical subject matter" (1993, 110). The importance for observation sentences of his epistemology is that it enables him to make a clear case for their importance in enabling nature to be a *neutral arbiter* of scientific

disputes. Speakers are conditioned to respond to external stimulation in similar ways. Scientific disagreements can be resolved on objective grounds because, despite diverging theoretical commitments and their attendant influence on perception and judgment, scientists are similarly conditioned to respond verbally to certain external stimuli.

Quine is articulating, as Moody-Adams says, a point many people implicitly accept, and he is doing it in a way that avoids questionable commitments to theory-free observation. The stimulation patterns to which speakers become conditioned to respond as they learn a language or theory are not items of conscious awareness. This is one reason he deserves the attention Moody-Adams gives him, despite how little he has written on ethics. He makes an effective case for concern about the absence of a clear evidence base in ethics *comparable in epistemic force* to observation in science. But this does not seem tantamount to holding ethics up to scientific standards. Indeed, some of his remarks on language learning give reason to think his underlying point is much closer to Moody-Adams in spirit: lacking a mediating external stimulus, the learning of evaluative language is different from the learning of descriptive language, and for that reason the evidentiary relations for science and ethics are significantly different (Quine 1975, 74f.). Were Quine to expand on just what the relationship of experience to ethics is, I see no clear reason why he could not accept much of what Moody-Adams claims.

Indeed, although Quine is the stalking horse here, he otherwise provides an accommodating background to many of Moody-Adams's views. The attack on First Philosophy – signaled famously by the very seafaring metaphor of Neurath's which Moody-Adams employs – certainly fits. More relevant still are Quine's famous reflections on translation, particularly the idea (the so-called "charity principle") that without the imposition of conceptual overlap, interpretation and internal understanding of culture are impossible. This latter is a central theme of the Davidsonian view on which Moody-Adams draws. Indeed, this view might provide some useful resources in responding to the Quinean objection I just articulated. Recent work of Davidson's on ethics articulates many points that directly support Moody-Adams. He rejects Quine's invocation of observation sentences in the service of articulating objectivity, opting instead to develop the insight that successful discussion of ethics – either within or between cultures – is impossible without the assumption of considerable overlap in ethical conceptual background. (See, e.g., his 1984, 1990, and especially 1995.)

One might worry that doing this would be to miss Moody-Adams's point that moral philosophy should distance itself from abstract questions concerned with the general validation of ethics in favor of issues more likely to make constructive engagement with ordinary, workmanlike moral discourse. However, as her own discussion of moral objectivity attests, this is an issue that bears in important and concrete ways on ethical discussion. People *do* constantly bring up the subjectivity of ethical belief in ways that

make impacts, positive and negative, on productive discussion of ethical questions. Moreover, while general epistemology is somewhat distant from the social contexts that primarily concern her, it is nonetheless useful to have some grasp of how her thesis about ethical epistemology fits in.

Robert Feleppa

Department of Philosophy

Wichita State University

Wichita, KS 67260-0074

USA

feleppa@twsvvm.uc.twsu.edu

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The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social. By Hanna Fenichel Pitkin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. 365.

Hanna Fenichel Pitkin's new book, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, is an impressive work that weaves together philosophical, political, genealogical, sociological, and psychoanalytic analysis into an intricate and finely detailed theoretical fabric. One of the

most impressive things about the book is Pitkin's prose style, which manages to be admirably clear without being the least bit dry. Moreover, the assumption that motivates her detailed analysis of Arendt's way of conceptualizing "the social" – namely, that "the concept merits attention not because [Arendt] got it right and used it to teach an important truth, but quite the contrary, because the concept was confused and her way of deploying it radically at odds with her most central and valuable teaching" (1) – is provocative and interesting, and provides an illuminating focal point for Pitkin's in-depth analysis of Arendt's life and works. In the end, I'm not completely convinced that Pitkin accomplishes all that she sets out to accomplish in the book, but no matter; along the way, she says much of value, and the book will no doubt stimulate and advance debates not just among Arendt scholars, but also among social and political theorists more generally.

Pitkin has three aims in the book. First and foremost, the book is a genealogy, the aim of which is "to clarify the meaning of Arendt's concept of the social by tracing its gradual formation in the sequence of her works up to, and slightly beyond, *The Human Condition*" (18). The concept of the social in Arendt's work has been the subject of vigorous debate among Arendt scholars in recent years. This debate has most often focused on the convoluted and troublesome relationship between the social, the public, and the private in Arendt's work. In the course of this debate, commentators have tended to assume that the social refers to the emergence of what Arendt considers properly private concerns (including all matters concerning labor, the body, the family, and economics) into the public, political realm. In response to this ongoing debate, Pitkin helpfully points out that in Arendt's work, the social contrasts as much with the private realm as it does with the public; as she puts it, "the social threatens and ultimately destroys privacy, just as much as it threatens and destroys public life" (14). Thus, it is too simplistic to view the social in Arendt as simply an overgrown private realm. Through her genealogical account, Pitkin advances the argument that although the concept of the social in Arendt is problematic indeed, it is not so in the way or for the reasons that most of Arendt's interpreters have up to now assumed.

This leads to Pitkin's second aim in the book, which is to show that Arendt's use of the concept of the social is fundamentally confused, and this in two senses. It is confused in itself in that Arendt seemed to mean many different things by the term, and some of these meanings contradicted others. But the more important sense in which her use of the concept of the social is confused, according to Pitkin, is that it stands in contradiction to Arendt's most basic insights about action, freedom, and politics. Indeed, the central thesis of the book is that Arendt, who placed so much emphasis on the ability that we have to act, to begin something anew, that is, on the freedom that Arendt understood as the core of politics, was (seemingly unwittingly) also committed to a view of the social as a "Blob,"

a superhuman entity that dominates human beings, sucks them in, and renders them passive and inert, incapable of action and politics. As Pitkin puts it, “In . . . *The Human Condition*, clearly we moderns are in a bad fix, about which we urgently need to do something. Yet if one asks whose fault that is, what has put us in this alarming situation, the answer seems to be society, the social. Arendt depicts it as a living, autonomous agent determined to dominate human beings, absorb them, and render them helpless” (3). That depiction leads Pitkin to wonder: “why would a thinker whose intent is so clearly liberatory and empowering develop a concept so blatantly contrary to that intent?” (4). In the course of laying out her account of the genesis of the concept of the social in Arendt’s thought, Pitkin attempts to answer this question as well, via a consideration of the political, cultural, and personal situation within which Arendt thought and wrote.

The final aim of the book is to sketch out some general conclusions about how political theorists can conceptualize the social without falling prey to the problems that did Arendt’s conception in. Pitkin grants that Arendt’s conception of the social was intended to address a serious, real-world problem, a problem which Pitkin designates “the paradox of modernity . . . : more and more, as our power grows, the results of our own activities confront us like an alien and hostile force, beyond our influence” (8). However, Pitkin maintains that Arendt’s attempts to address this problem via her conception of the social were dismal failures; in the final chapter of the book, Pitkin considers how social and political theorists might address the real-world problem that Arendt was worried about, without falling into the social-as-Blob trap.

Pitkin begins her genealogy of the concept of the social with an analysis of Arendt’s biography of Rahel Varnhagen. She argues that the basic distinction in that work between the *pariah* – the social outcast – and the *parvenu* – the pariah who desperately conforms to the dictates of society, yearning for acceptance in the society that has cast him out – contains the seeds of Arendt’s later conception of the social. Next, Pitkin traces the development of these concepts – pariah, parvenu, and the social – in the essays that Arendt wrote in New York for Jewish publications in the 1940s. She argues that in the New York essays the notion of the *conscious pariah* – the pariah who “reject[s] pariah status on principle, consciously and openly, as unjust, and oppos[es] it actively in solidarity with others” (64) – emerges as the only viable political alternative to being a parvenu. Pitkin goes on to suggest that in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, this opposition between the parvenu and the conscious pariah is gradually replaced by the general distinction between the social and the political. Finally, in *The Human Condition*, this general distinction takes on a particular, and a particularly problematic, form: namely, that of “the Arendtian contrast between the determined necessity of the social and free political action” (143). As I mentioned above, Pitkin suggests that this

contrast is ultimately untenable, since the ways in which the social determines us seem so fundamentally at odds with the freedom which Arendt takes to be a necessary feature of political action.

Pitkin's genealogy is certainly very careful, and she has an enviable mastery not just of Arendt's published writings, but also of her correspondence, her intellectual biography, and the social and political events of the twentieth century that shaped her thought. However, I was not completely convinced by her claim that the terms "pariah" and "parvenu" contain "in embryonic form" (19) Arendt's later distinction between the political and the social; as a result, I found myself wondering about Pitkin's concomitant decision to structure her entire genealogy of the social around this distinction. Although this is no doubt an ingenious approach to Arendt's work, it also leads into what seems to me to be a rather forced reading of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In the course of that reading, Pitkin maintains that one can use the notion of the parvenu to make sense of the various groups of people that Arendt claims contributed to the rise first of imperialism and later of totalitarianism – including anti-Semites, the bourgeoisie, colonial bureaucrats, secret agents, adventurers, the Boers, the mob, and the mass. But she then goes on to say:

None of these categories precisely fits the image of the parvenu from Arendt's early writings, and Arendt never calls them parvenus; nor are they all alike. But there is something like a family resemblance; each category involves at least some parvenu features. All are in some sense pariahs to begin with, even if not literally so. All consist in some way of isolated individuals, incapable of solidarity or mutuality, who abdicate their human capacities and responsibilities to a projected "they" or "it," with disastrous consequences, both for other people and eventually for themselves. (79)

In this passage, Pitkin herself seems to recognize that she is stretching a bit. And in the pages that follow, she admits that the secret agents and colonial bureaucrats rebelled against polite society in a way that was completely the opposite of parvenu conformism (80); that since the Boers exiled themselves from European society, they were not exactly pariahs (80), which makes one wonder how they could be parvenus; and that the mob responds to their pariah status not with the assimilationist striving typical of the parvenu, but with a "resentful withdrawal from responsibility" (82). I am not suggesting that Pitkin contradicts herself here; she acknowledges up front that none of these categories corresponds neatly with Arendt's notion of the parvenu. What I am suggesting is that the attempt to use the categories of pariah and parvenu to explain the argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* quickly becomes so messy and convoluted, even in such able hands as Pitkin's, that one begins to wonder whether or not it is worth trying.

Regarding Pitkin's second aim, I think she is absolutely right in claiming that Arendt's usage of the term "the social" is confused in itself,

and Pitkin's delineation of the various aspects of the social – including parvenu striving for acceptance by conforming to the standards of polite society and the economic model of the market which generates acquisitiveness and greed – is helpful and illuminating. I am somewhat less convinced that Arendt's notion of the social is necessarily in contradiction to her basic teaching about action and politics, but I'll say more about that in a moment. The major concern I have with the way Pitkin carries out the second aim of the book involves her answer to the question of why Arendt came up with this vision of the social as Blob, given that it seems to be in contradiction to some of her most basic philosophical beliefs. As a partial answer to this question, Pitkin appeals at various points in her narrative to various facts about Arendt's personal life (her father's death when she was still quite young, her relationship with Heidegger) and to psychoanalytic models that she seems to think explain how these events in Arendt's life led her to adopt the view of the social that she did. For instance, Pitkin maintains that Arendt's ambivalent theoretical relationship to both Tocqueville and Marx, who served as what Pitkin calls "absent authorities" for *The Human Condition*, can be explained as follows:

She simultaneously yearned to be in the game, to possess – and prove her possession of – the "masculine" powers of abstraction and authority, feared failure at the game and punishment for her temerity, and rejected the game for its "masculine" abstractness, unreality, and impersonality. . . . Arendt's peculiar, ambivalent treatment of her intellectual authorities . . . should be understood as an effort to take from the fathers the authority to join them, without becoming dependent on them. (162)

Similarly, Pitkin maintains that Arendt's curious lack of attention to her pariahdom as a woman – especially curious in light of all the attention she gave to her pariahdom as a Jew – can be explained by an appeal to the psychoanalytic notion of the "bad mother" of infantile experience, the all-encompassing, engulfing, dominating mother who absorbs the infant's individuality. Pitkin claims that Arendt associated femininity with this bad mother, which meant that it was a threat to individuality, action, and politics in a way that Jewish identity was not. She writes:

Jewishness sorted for her with individuality, politics, and the world, as something precious to be protected against the feminine threat: not masculine so much as beyond the gender dichotomy, and not psychically threatening. Arendt's femininity, by contrast, was a personal problem because it raised unconscious conflicts about controlling the destructive inner force, about whether such control was compatible with self-realization and pleasure or only with self-sacrifice and submission. (174)

According to Pitkin, this unconscious conflict not only led Arendt to ignore her feminine pariahdom even as she stressed her Jewish pariahdom,

but it also contributed to her envisioning of the social as Blob (the social as Blob is a feminine, specifically a maternal, concept – it devours free individuals in the same way the bad mother absorbs infants), and to her reliance on the Greeks in the account of politics in *The Human Condition* (as Pitkin puts it, the “paternal domination [of the Greeks] is needed to keep the [feminine] Blob from getting loose among us” [175]).

What seems strange in all this is that throughout the whole book, Pitkin takes Arendt to task for implicitly denying, via her deployment of the concept of the social, the freedom and agency of individuals that were such a big part of her view of politics. And yet, in her attempt to explain why Arendt might have fallen into such a contradiction, Pitkin seems to deny or at least to undermine Arendt’s own freedom as a thinker. The death of Arendt’s father when she was still a child, her conflicted relationship with her mother, and her troubled affair with Heidegger when she was still an impressionable young woman left her with “ambivalences” (168) and “unconscious conflicts” (174) that compelled her to adopt philosophical positions that are contrary to her own best insights. In other words, Pitkin’s desire to explain Arendt’s blindness to the problems that she points out leads her to fall into her own contradiction, to undercut Arendt’s own freedom as a thinker even as she takes Arendt to task for undermining the freedom of actors in contemporary mass societies. To be fair, Pitkin does acknowledge later on that her psychoanalytic account doesn’t provide a complete explanation for the emergence of the Blob problem in Arendt’s work (see 231), and yet even to consider it a partial explanation seems to run counter to the general tenor of Pitkin’s argument.

Finally, with respect to Pitkin’s third aim in the book, I confess to being a bit puzzled by her attempt to specify how political theorists can conceptualize the social without falling into the social-as-Blob trap. Pitkin suggests that the real reason that Arendt had such a hard time envisioning the social without the Blob is that political theory itself “is about, and addressed to, people who are and are not parts of a unitary whole, who are (or could be) actively testing the limits of what they can and cannot do, individually and collectively. . . . So the political theorist is forever in the paradoxical position of telling people unchangeable truths about what they are doing, in hopes of getting them to change what they are doing” (242). This is, according to Pitkin, just an intractable problem of political theory. This seems true enough. To help deal with this intractable paradox, Pitkin suggests a method of dialectical thinking, by which she means “a way of living with ambiguity and inconsistency that permits intellectual comprehension and mastery without resolving the tensions” (247). Pitkin maintains that Arendt was an inspiration for her understanding of dialectical thinking, but that Arendt herself didn’t really formulate this idea satisfactorily. That may be so, but I am inclined to see Arendt’s thought as itself dialectical, even if she herself didn’t formulate an explicit conception of what dialectical thought is. And because I tend to read Arendt this way, I

also tend to see Pitkin's proposed way around the Blob problem in Arendt, which involves "a balanced readiness to translate back and forth as needed between the perspective of the spectator and that of the actor, between causation and agency, between large-scale collective conditions and individual experience and options, between abstract principles and particular applications" (249), as what Arendt herself was doing all along. Of course, if this is the case, then it turns out that there never really was a contradiction between Arendt's account of the social and her account of free, political action; there was instead a dialectical tension, an ambiguity, that cannot be fully resolved but that Arendt nevertheless challenges us to think through.

That Pitkin does not, in my estimation, fully accomplish all that she sets out to accomplish does not make this book any less worthwhile. Her aims are ambitious and her attempts to accomplish them provocative and interesting. Arendt scholars and social and political theorists will benefit enormously from Pitkin's challenging and insightful work.

Amy Allen
 Department of Philosophy
 Dartmouth College
 Hanover, NH 03755
 USA
 Amy.R.Allen@dartmouth.edu

Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate. By Susan Haack. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pp. x + 223.

I remember seeing a cartoon in the *New Yorker* several years ago, in which someone says, in describing an acquaintance, that "He's a good person, but he has no integrity." The cartoon is funny, of course, because of the incongruity involved in trying to imagine what a good person with no integrity could possibly be like. I suppose it may be possible for a person to possess some particular virtues, even while failing to achieve the kind of integration of character and judgment, personal honesty and constancy, to which the concept of integrity points. But integrity is a virtue which is fundamental to being a moral and, in some respects, even a cognitive agent. Its current devaluation, then, is a matter of serious concern. Moral integrity is at a noticeably low point in large segments of contemporary western culture – due in large part to the disruption and corruption of its social preconditions. Intellectual integrity – the respect for objective and disinterested inquiry – is at a noticeably low point in large segments of contemporary academic culture, particularly in the humanities. Susan Haack's *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, a collection of eleven recent essays, is an incisive and brilliant critique of influential intellectual and social

forces in the academy today that have debased, if not entirely obscured, the concept of intellectual integrity.

As she announces in the title of the book, Haack considers herself a “passionate moderate.” She positions herself between what she calls “Old Deferentialism,” on the one hand, and “the New Cynicism,” on the other. “Old Deferentialism” is Haack’s term for the position that there is a uniquely rational and objective method of inquiry achieved by the sciences, which gives science privileged epistemic authority – that there is such a thing as “the logic of science” which can be applied impersonally, objectively, even mechanically, to achieve progressively greater knowledge of the world (106). Haack agrees with those who reject Old Deferentialism’s rigid conception of inquiry. She acknowledges that participants in the scientific enterprise are fallible and rarely, if ever, entirely free of prejudice and partisanship (109). But she argues that even though scientific inquiry is an imperfect social enterprise, this fact does not support the truth of currently popular academic shibboleths to the effect that objective epistemic standards are impossible, and that traditional epistemic concepts must be deconstructed to account for the relativity and subjectivity of knowledge claims.

Haack announces at the outset that she is proud to be “a lovably old-fashioned prig” – Richard Rorty’s term for those who maintain that inquiry can yield objective truth rather than just consensual belief (7). On the basis of this objectivist standpoint, Haack’s aim is to expose what she says are some of the “particularly daft ideas” and “particularly grotesque intellectual pretensions” in the academy today (x). She has the most virulent and challenging things to say against those philosophers she calls the “new cynics.” They are the intellectual left wing: neopragmatists (especially Richard Rorty), radical academic feminists (especially Sandra Harding), postmodernists, relativists, and those who believe in epistemological versions of multiculturalism. The “new cynics” contend that the terms “reality,” “knowledge,” “truth,” and “inquiry” should be used only in scare quotes, since they have no objective significance. They claim, for example, that “reality” is just a social construction; that “knowledge” is only propaganda (4); that “inquiry” is nothing but a process of political power struggles among competing interest groups; and that science is “a politics permeated institution in urgent need of transformation by an infusion of progressive values” (110).

Haack argues against the current politicization of the idea of inquiry (see especially “Science as Social?”). She holds that there are objective, nonpolitical standards for better and worse evidence, and better and worse methods of inquiry. The point she is most anxious to press home is that the notion of inquiry necessarily incorporates the notion of warrant; and that the warrantedness of a belief must be differentiated from the fact of its being merely accepted. It is the failure to differentiate these, Haack believes, which leads to the ubiquity of what she calls the “passes for”

fallacy: “the fallacious inference from the true premise [that] what has passed for relevant evidence, known fact, objective truth, and so forth, sometimes turns out to be no such thing, to the false conclusion that the notions of relevant evidence, known fact, established truth, etc., are revealed to be ideological humbug” (117).

Against the politicization of inquiry, Haack argues that the idea of “feminist epistemology,” proposed by some feminists as an antidote to “male epistemology,” is as incongruous as the idea of “Republican [in contrast to Democratic] epistemology” (124). She argues further that any attempt to restrict what we shall consider to be true by judging factual claims against a political litmus test is reminiscent of Soviet biology as practiced under Stalin (108–9).

Haack’s book is an impressive model of philosophical writing and reasoning. Her essays vividly demonstrate the depth of her moral commitment, and they are rich in subtlety, irony, and humor. She is thorough and even relentless in the pursuit of her arguments, and scrupulous and imaginative in generating and responding to possible objections to her views. Haack is particularly adept at disambiguating positions which other philosophers have conflated or oversimplified (see especially “Multiculturalism and Objectivity” and “Reflections on Relativism”). The hero of this book is Charles Sanders Peirce, the curmudgeonly but principled founder of classical pragmatism, whose commitments to the objectivity of truth and the principles of disinterested inquiry are echoed throughout Haack’s arguments. The individual who gets the most negative attention is Richard Rorty, particularly for his view that inquiry is just a kind of negotiation and that truth is just whatever survives all conversational objections. In “‘We Pragmatists . . .’: Peirce and Rorty in Conversation,” Haack constructs a “conversation” out of quotations from Peirce’s and Rorty’s writings, which are designed to demonstrate the vast differences between their views, undermining Rorty’s claim to be a legitimate heir to classical pragmatism. In “Confessions of an Old-Fashioned Prig” and “As for that phrase ‘studying in a literary spirit’ . . .,” Haack argues that Rorty has a paltry and inaccurate understanding of pragmatism, that his is a “Vulgar Pragmatism,” and that he employs the concept of justification only in an “anorexic sense” (20).

In “Multiculturalism and Objectivity,” Haack underscores the validity and importance of some versions of multiculturalism, particularly what most would regard as the uncontroversial judgment that it is desirable for people to know about cultures other than their own. But she rejects, as another manifestation of the increasingly pervasive irrationalism of our times, the position she calls “philosophical, epistemological multiculturalism.” This is the view that the standards of evidence and epistemic justification are culture- or community-bound; that inquiry is inevitably disguisedly political (142); and that dominant social classes (for example, white heterosexual males) hold an epistemic privilege which is undeserved (141).

In the final two essays of the book, Haack moves from philosophical to social criticism, offering her view of the intellectual and institutional damage wreaked by recent trends in the academy. In “Preposterism and Its Consequences” she argues that the research ethic in philosophy (as in the university generally) – by which tenure, promotion, salary increase, and so on, are tied to research output – has led to such a preoccupation with publication that the fact that ideas have been published has come to carry far more weight than the quality of those ideas themselves. Haack charges (applying concepts from Peirce) that there is an epidemic of “sham” and “fake” reasoning and that far too much philosophical writing is being done in order to preserve jobs and to enhance salaries and reputations rather than to pursue the truth. The result is a culture of intellectual mediocrity and disingenuousness in which the legitimate aims of the university are eclipsed.

The practice of affirmative action in faculty hiring is another area in which Haack believes that academics have lost sight of the fact that the fundamental aim of the university is the pursuit and cultivation of knowledge. In “The best man for the job may be a woman . . . ,” she shows great insight and even courage in exposing the rueful fact that fear and greed often predominate as unstated motives in faculty-hiring practices (172–73). Haack argues that faculty should be hired solely on the basis of how well they can contribute to the university’s teaching and research efforts: on criteria which are race- and gender-blind and which exclude any self-interested desires of those on hiring committees.

In *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, Haack provides penetrating and astute support, currently much needed, for the highest ideals of inquiry and intellectual integrity. I find her arguments powerful and impressive and share many, though not all, of her ideals. I am less sanguine than she is, however, about the degree to which some of those ideals are realizable, at least as a matter of fact, and perhaps also even as a matter of principle.

Consider, for example, the issue of affirmative action in faculty hiring. Haack argues that to sustain the intellectual integrity of the university, faculty should be hired solely on the basis of their excellence in teaching and research abilities, without considerations of gender or race. While there are several considerations which could be brought against this claim, I will restrict myself to only one point, and this concerns the ambiguity and difficulty involved in applying such a principle in practice.

What are the appropriate criteria for determining excellence in teaching and research abilities, and how do we determine the relative importance of each of these two abilities? To adequately assess the scholarly and pedagogical achievement and potential of a job candidate requires the use of norms developed on the basis of experience and judgment. No rote application of preestablished standards will succeed. Thus, it is inevitable that the beliefs and values of those doing the hiring will go into determining which new faculty are selected. Haack is, of course, entirely right to insist

that greed and fear are not appropriate motives for faculty selection. But it is less easy to decide on the relative strength of other, legitimate hiring criteria and to decide on how those criteria should be applied in any given case.

Given the need for the use of judgment on the part of faculty-hiring committees, it makes a difference, for example, that male candidates for philosophical positions have an argumentative style which is often more assertive and adversarial than that of female candidates. And it makes a difference that in most philosophy departments, the majority of the faculty – who are males – will most likely be impressed by such a style as a mark of superior philosophical talent, and thus that most philosophy departments will be more inclined to hire male over female candidates. The problem with Haack's call for the use of depoliticized, objective criteria in faculty hiring is that however worthy it is as an ideal, in many cases such an injunction will have no substantive effect on the way decisions are in fact made. These ideals will be used, rather, to justify established (and sometimes regressive) practices. For example, the male majorities in most philosophy departments often already believe – based on their own judgment and experience – that their criteria for faculty selection are as objective as possible, and hence they are unlikely to modify their point of view significantly. In such a context it does no good to insist, for the sake of the integrity of the university, that only objective criteria of intellectual and pedagogical excellence should be employed in hiring. For it is precisely under the imprimatur of objectivity that gender inequities in hiring are often perpetuated.

The existence and apparent intractability of this kind of inequity are precisely what lead some feminists and other “new cynics” to argue, first, that the appeal to objective standards is politically regressive insofar as it simply perpetuates the status quo in terms of existing power relationships, and, second, that power relationships are in principle unavoidable factors in determining what counts as objective. I agree with Haack that these philosophers are not justified in their second claim – that is, in asserting the theoretical impossibility of objective judgments. Still, I believe that Haack underplays the significance of their first insight, when they highlight the practical problems of trying to convince those in power, who typically already believe they are being objective, that actually they are not.

My response to Haack's analysis of scientific inquiry parallels the points I have just made. It is important to see, as Haack has so ably shown, that the “new cynics” go too far in denying the meaningfulness of the concept of objectivity. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the degree to which those in dominant power positions in the scientific establishment (whether innocently or not) appeal to objectivity in promoting judgments which in fact privilege their own experience and values.

To sum up my response to Haack's position, I believe that insofar as the “new cynics” use their political observations to advance a relativist and

constructivist epistemology and metaphysics, Haack's arguments against them are extraordinarily powerful and convincing. But when Haack's idealized prescriptions to "be objective" are meant to apply to the complex social and political realities in which factual and evaluative judgments are actually made, I have doubts that they will have the salutary effect that she desires. Given the necessity of interpretation and judgment, it still remains to be seen whether enduring and systematic attempts to be objective will, in fact, lead to the eradication of mistake or bias, as William James put it, "on the whole and in the long run" (106); or as C. S. Peirce put it, once "investigation [is] carried sufficiently far" (139).

While Haack has impressive success in showing the logical difficulties in her opponents' position, she does not use this book to develop the extensive discussion which would be required to establish several of her own positive views. In particular, it would be helpful to see fuller support, first, for Haack's contention that perception may be both direct and interpretive (161), and, second, for her claim that the view she propounds as "innocent realism" is sufficiently distinct from the various versions of the correspondence theory of truth so as to avoid the problems which that theory engenders (156–64). While *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* is not intended to be the venue for an extensive discussion of these more theoretical matters, Haack's recommendations in favor of objective inquiry remain vulnerable until the premises on which they are based are more fully established.

Whatever the practical difficulties in implementing Haack's prescriptions, or the theoretic difficulties to which her metaphysical realism may be susceptible, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* remains a strong and effective indictment of some troubling and pervasive intellectual practices of our times. There is little doubt of the great harm being done, both inside and outside the academy, by a cavalier and cynical attitude toward justification and truth. Juries deciding "guilt" or "innocence" on political rather than evidential grounds do grave damage to our system of justice. Government leaders lying under oath do serious damage to our political system and national ideals. Biographers and autobiographers who, for political or other reasons, incorporate fictional characters and events into their reports as though they were factual do serious damage to standards of intellectual integrity.¹ Academics who violate their fiduciary relationship to their students by replacing critical inquiry with political proselytizing do grave injustice to our educational institutions. Media and Internet communications which obscure the distinction between reportage and advertising both encourage credulity and erode trust. Examples of the breakdown of intellectual integrity are not hard to find.

¹ Consider, for example, the controversies around the truthfulness of two presumably nonfiction works: the autobiography of Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú, and Edmund Morris's recently published biography of Ronald Reagan.

The community of practicing scientists, usually too involved in doing science to become caught up in the mire of debates about the social construction of reality, truth, and so on, has been profoundly impressive in extending the range of human knowledge (or even “knowledge” in scare quotes, if that is what you prefer). There is little doubt, just to take two recent examples, that advances in information technology and genetics will utterly transform human life in the century to come.

Perhaps I am less “sophisticated” than my postmodern contemporaries, but I still believe that in a world where scientific and technological developments are accelerating at an ever more explosive pace, it is the responsibility of philosophers and other humanists to help society sustain its moral and intellectual compass. It is ironic that the theories of the “new cynics,” which tie knowledge to power, have led the humanities itself into a spiral of decreasing power on a practical level – a progressive social, moral, and intellectual irrelevance and isolation. It is no surprise, in the current milieu, that funding for the humanities and enrollment in humanities courses have decreased. It is sad that at a time when humanists could be especially helpful, so many seem to have abjured their social and intellectual responsibilities.

Ellen Kappy Suckiel
Philosophy Department
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA 95064
USA
suckiel@cats.ucsc.edu

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