

Liberalism, Partiality, and Cultural Goods

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Jack Hume

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Declaration

I, Jack Hume, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

Why should liberal states support arts and culture? This thesis develops a new answer to this question. I argue that existing debates about arts funding in the liberal tradition have failed to grasp its contribution to the collective good of cultural literacy. Diversity-based arts funding contributes to a shared package of socio-cognitive goods—a culturally literate society—such that citizens are better placed to understand themselves and each other. It does this by filling gaps in the materials we have for understanding the histories, experiences, and beliefs of ourselves and others. However, concerns of fairness arise with respect to how these benefits are promoted. Adopting a prioritarian view for responding to these concerns, I argue that one of the most praised cultural policies of contemporary liberal societies—the UK’s policy of free admissions to major museums—is a surprisingly bad way of distributing cultural opportunities to disadvantaged groups, because it sustains unfair geographical inequalities. It would be better to charge at major museums and harness that income for ‘levelling up’. I then consider the upshots of this prioritarian approach for a theory of cultural justice. Turning to case studies from Indigenous Australia, I argue that any plausible account of cultural justice will have to accommodate the importance of cultural agency. In an ideal society, I argue, cultural goods would continually help individuals and groups to understand and respect themselves and each other, given their cultural differences. This civic role requires autonomous participation in the production of the cultural goods that represent us. Finally, I argue that cultural literacy and cultural agency together provide a useful framework for considering whether and how to democratise cultural institutions. These contributions reframe existing debates, generate criticisms of many real-world arrangements, and introduce a range of new concepts to liberal theories of justice.

Impact Statement

This dissertation addresses questions about the value of arts and culture in liberal democracies, and the just use of political power. It aims to develop an account of why liberal states should support arts and cultural heritage. This question is relevant to debates in contemporary political philosophy about the proper role of government in promoting culture, public policy decisions surrounding cultural policies, and to questions about the institutional design of cultural organisations like museums, galleries, archives and libraries. An important intervention in these debates is made in Chapter 1, which argues that diversity-based arts funding can contribute to the public good by fostering cultural literacy. This research has also been published in *Ergo* (2024).

A central contribution of this dissertation is that it provides an empirically informed account of ethical issues surrounding public funding for arts and cultural heritage. While the ethics of cultural policies remains a core interest in liberal debates about paternalism and autonomy, detailed case studies are almost entirely missing from the literature. This project has the potential to improve the empirical depth of these debates, thereby refining our understanding of the role that cultural goods and practices can play in an ideal society with features similar to real-world liberal democratic states.

Relatedly, this dissertation develops frameworks for assessing the fairness of actual cultural policies. These frameworks are developed, tested and refined through engagement with a number of policy questions, including whether museums and heritage sites should be made free to access, how citizens and states can explain the value of diversity-based arts funding, the role of cultural policies in distributing basic goods and addressing injustice, and what democracy requires of cultural organisations. My analysis of funding for national museums in England, in particular, has the potential to inform public debates and feasible policy planning for levelling-up. My research on this topic is presented in Chapter 2 and has been published in *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2025).

Beyond philosophy and public policy, this dissertation also develops models for thinking about the role that experts should play in decisions surrounding the management of cultural goods, and when the concerns of nonexperts should be considered more important. It may therefore be helpful for organisations considering how to democratise their work, and to debates about the authority of experts in democracies.

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Introduction

1. Cultural Policies in the Liberal Tradition

Funding for arts and cultural heritage is common to all liberal democracies. But this feature of liberal societies remains largely unexplored in liberal political thought. The little attention cultural policies have received revolves around *whether* states can justifiably support them, as opposed to *how* they might do so. However, most of the distinctive and foundational ethical questions facing cultural policies arise at the level of design and implementation, and not in abstract questions of justification. As a result, ethical questions relating to content, distributive fairness, and agency, are yet to be deeply considered in the literature. The core objective of this dissertation is to provide a more comprehensive conceptual analysis of cultural policies, covering both *why* and *how* twenty-first century liberal states should develop cultural policy. I draw on liberal political philosophy, aesthetics, and museum studies to clarify and defend the distinctive roles that cultural policies should play in promoting a more just society.

Among my core contributions are two concepts. First, the ideal of *cultural literacy*: of striving to understand ourselves and each other, despite our cultural differences. Second, the ideal of *cultural agency*: of aiming to promote human capacities for self-formation (the ability to shape and preserve our identity) and self-respect (the ability to affirm our equal standing, and the worth of our projects). I argue that cultural policies can play a distinctive and effective role in promoting these ideals, respectively by (1) diversifying the public resources we have for recognising and interpreting experiences, cultures, and beliefs, and (2) empowering marginalised groups to influence the cultural goods that represent them and promoting conditions under which their identities are respectfully portrayed. This kind of work is not only consistent with the aims of social justice but can also make contributions toward the collective good of a “culturally literate society”—a society where we are all better placed to understand ourselves and each other, and to avoid states of ignorance and confusion that foster stigma, anxiety, and disrespect. The concepts are intended as *political ideals*: they can be defended without recourse to a controversial conception of the good life and can therefore be expected to satisfy the requirements of public justification. Paired with principles of distributive justice, they are effective tools for discriminating between policies that improve the condition of marginalised groups, and policies that worsen this condition.

My arguments are anchored in anti-perfectionist liberalism and have a historical dimension. How can liberal states support art and cultural heritage if such policies favour particular ways of life, such as artmaking and appreciation? This justificatory inquiry is of interest to liberals primarily because of a concern with public justification in general, i.e. the ability to justify state actions to

one another without recourse to controversial ideals. These days, most liberals are committed to what we can refer to as a principle of neutrality, that “[s]tate action must be acceptable or justifiable to all reasonable citizens” (Tahzib 2022, p. 36).¹ This principle is typically defended on the basis that our presumptive status as free and equal citizens is disrespected if we impose our own ideals and lifestyles on each other (Quong 2011, Nussbaum 2011). Treating one another with respect requires drawing on considerations we can each as reasonable citizens be expected to understand in our capacity as citizens. And because many reasonable citizens disagree about what constitutes a flourishing life, the public justification principle is usually taken to rule out appeals to particular conceptions of flourishing.

A commitment to public justification, combined with an assumption that most or all real-world cultural policies appeal to human flourishing, has given arts funding an unusual role in contemporary liberal thought. Answers to the justificatory question have apparently filtered philosophers into two camps. In one camp are *perfectionist liberals*, who believe that states can justifiably promote a particular conception of human flourishing (e.g. Raz, Wall, Tahzib). In another camp are *anti-perfectionist liberals*, who argue that states’ justifications for state action cannot be based on a particular conception of flourishing (e.g. Rawls, Quong). If most or all forms of arts funding are based on a commitment to promoting human flourishing, perfectionists are uniquely placed to explain and defend arts funding. Anti-perfectionists must either therefore loosen their commitment to public justification, or develop a model for cultural policies that deviates from real-world justifications, or otherwise double-down and say that, despite being counterintuitive, arts funding is unjustifiable.

I find this framing of arts funding’s relevance largely unhelpful. It is not just that it fails to encourage other important questions to be taken up—relating to representational content, distributive fairness, and cultural agency—but that it also relies on an outdated assumption about the ways in which cultural policies are justified. Perfectionist ways of valuing have a prominent place in the history of arts funding, which has roots in Enlightenment-era policies to “civilise” public tastes through public museums, and post-war Keynesian policies aimed at bringing fine arts to working class communities (Bennett 1995).² The most sincere way of justifying these cultural policies was by appealing to the intrinsic superiority of particular (often male-dominated and European) cultural practices.

¹ In line with contemporary terminology, Tahzib refers to this as a “principle of public justification” rather than a “neutrality principle”. The writing that this thesis takes as its port of departure—from e.g. Rawls (1971), Raz (1986), Dworkin (1986), Brighouse (1995)—were all written when the term “neutrality” was still common. To engage with this work, I refer to this principle as the neutrality principle in Chapter 1.

² The macroeconomic frameworks of John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) helped to provide a rationale for the social spending of some liberal states in the postwar period. Keynes also played a specific and formative role in the development of ‘arms-length’ funding arrangements now common to e.g. the United Kingdom (e.g. the Arts Council of England), America (e.g. the National Endowment for the Arts), Australia (e.g. The Australia Council for the Arts, now called Creative Australia), Canada (e.g. The Canada Council for the Arts), and New Zealand (e.g. Creative New Zealand). For discussion of Keynes’s influence on modern-day arts funding in Western states, see Upchurch (2004).

To be sure, the tradition of valuing cultural institutions *non-instrumentally* persists to this day and does not have to take an elitist or exclusionary form, where certain genres and artforms are seen as intrinsically superior (see e.g. Matherne 2024). At the same, the idea that perfectionist liberals are uniquely placed to justify real-world cultural policies presupposes a bygone era. The cultural policies and cultural institutions of liberal states have now largely transitioned away from appeals to universal value, artistic value, or moral improvement, and have instead centralised ideals of civic dialogue and participation, community, cultural diversity, and self-representation. I aim to capture and critically reflect on these historical developments through concrete case studies. This engaged work promotes conceptual innovation. It also generates critiques of existing answers to the justificatory question. And it leads to new fairness-based criticisms of real-world policies: policies which often fail on their own justificatory terms.

There are two other core contributions of the dissertation. First, I provide an examination of the relationship between free access to cultural institutions, and commitments to improving the conditions of disadvantaged groups. The tradition of making museums free at the point of access seems to vividly express a commitment to equality, and a rejection of the once-normal arrangement of restricting access to dignitaries and aristocrats. This relationship, though, has not been given careful analysis. I argue that the fairness-based argument for free entry to museums is often specious, because free access to an institution is not by itself an enabler of welfare for disadvantaged groups, who may still live far away from a particular venue, or not be particularly interested in its services.

Second, I also examine the role that democracy should play in cultural institutions like museums. Many museums in Western societies have legacies of systemic exclusion and colonial complicity. The idea that marginalised groups and nonexperts should be able to influence their work in collecting and curating seems like a fitting response to this. And the value of inclusive and collaborative programs are often defended in explicitly democratic terms. But I argue that the push to make museums more inclusive and collaborative faces a serious challenge. Specifically, it must explain how these goals are consistent with promoting accurate historical representations and audience engagement, or why it doesn't matter if they aren't. I address this objection by developing an epistemic justification for democratising museums, which explains how collaborative projects in museums aren't just valuable as processes that instantiate and promote agency and equality, but also as processes that reduce inaccuracies and produce distinctive aesthetic values.

In the remainder of this introduction, I outline some of the intellectual and historical background to this project. Before doing so, let me clarify that this project focuses on the ethics of state funding, not private patronage. This decision has been guided by topic compartmentalisation, rather than because I find questions of private funding uninteresting or

unrelated. In fact, in liberal states, private and public funding are closely linked, because the individuals and organisations receiving funds typically have a mixture of income sources, and the exact makeup of their funding is shaped by government policy. A museum's income, for example, may gradually tip in favour of private sources due to ongoing cuts in government grants. For organisations in this position, corporate sponsorship can be a path of survival paved with ethical risks.³ Issues also arise for organisations that are able to cover their costs without private investment but are offered donations that, from a purely financial perspective, seem too good to refuse. From another perspective, private donors also make decisions about where to donate. A key question that they face is one that states face as well: Can funding arts and cultural organisations make an effective contribution to the public good? Discussing private donations, Peter Singer (2019) raises significant concerns.⁴ Although not engaging with such concerns directly, this dissertation raises considerations in favour of state funding that could also apply to private donors, though I do not explore these connections myself.

2. What are Cultural Goods?

My conception of cultural goods is sociological, and in principle it extends beyond the artefacts and practices we might recognise as artistic or related to material heritage. What do I mean by a sociological conception of cultural goods? I understand cultural goods as objects and practices that are implicated in the shared beliefs, practices, and values of particular social groups (cf. Appiah 1994, pp. 111–12, Scheffler 2007, p. 107). I adopt this definition so that it can allow for the study of cultural policies through an anti-perfectionist lens. A sociological description of cultural goods avoids appeals to intrinsic value except by referring to the fact that a particular group regards a given cultural good—e.g. a Renaissance sculpture—as of intrinsic value. From a perspective of anti-perfectionist liberalism, this approach to thinking about cultural goods has clear advantages. This definition does not predetermine what the contents of a policy should look like, and so it prevents “cultural goods” from being definitionally captured by powerful social groups. Alternatively, if we define cultural goods in a more close-ended way (e.g. as artistic,

³ These risks often relate to ethical complicity, but they may also relate to unfair competition. Consider endowments. If an endowment has ties to morally problematic markets—either in its originating sources, or its ongoing investments—then staff, consumers, and the public may raise concerns about benefiting from injustice or unethical conduct or legitimatising it (in the context of art galleries, this is sometimes referred to as ‘art-washing’). Endowments can also raise concerns about fair equality of opportunity e.g. about competitive advantages they give to the organisations and individuals they support.

⁴ Peter Singer argues that “philanthropy for the arts or for cultural activities is, in a world like this one, morally dubious” (2019, p. 196). This comment is made in the context of investments on expensive paintings. Singer notes that in 2014, the Getty Museum purchased a Manet painting, *Spring*, for over \$65 million. He goes on: “But if it only costs Seva or Fred Hollows Foundation as little as \$50 to perform a cataract operation in low-income countries, that means there are 1,300,000 people who can’t see anything at all, let alone a painting, whose sight could have been restored by the sum paid for Spring ... How can a painting, no matter how beautiful and historically significant, compare with that?” (Singer 2019, pp. 196–97).

or linked with a certain kind of heritage), we run the risk of mistaking the practices that we value, or some powerful group values, as a definitive source of cultural value, which other groups and societies lack (cf. Smith 2006).⁵ Relatedly, this approach mitigates the risk of reifying cultural policies, i.e. mistaking them simply for what we currently take them to be. If we take the goods that play an active role in sustaining *our* group (or nation, region) as *the only* cultural goods, we can inadvertently license their imposition on others just by advocating for cultural policies.

Three further points are worth emphasising about this. First, a sociological conception counts a vast range of things as cultural goods. Applied to an artistic context like music, it includes not just musical works and performances, but e.g. musical instruments, genres, particular albums, particular songs, video clips, and music venues, as well as particular ways of valuing these things, e.g. gathering in concert halls, sharing links to new music, and listening to music alone or together. It also accommodates an open-ended range of goods that aren't traditionally characterised as artistic. For example, the social valuing practices of particular regions and groups including recipes, bars and restaurants, sports and sporting venues, and fashion. Second, this view says that whether some object or practice counts as a cultural good is simply a matter of context. It therefore accounts for historical and geographic variation in the valuing practices that distinguish particular groups. Finally, my conception is non-hierarchical, because it does not assign any particular value to any of these goods. Although cultural goods might be evaluated from a range of perspectives, no modes of valuing are built into this conception from the outset.

The core contrast, here, is a perfectionist concept of cultural goods. Perfectionist conceptions are normative. The history of ideas provides a wealth of references here. For example, the idea of *bildung*, developed by German thinkers in the 18th century, refers to the cultivation of our intellectual, moral, and spiritual character through an ongoing process of absorbing and harmonising ourselves with our society (Fraser 2014). Frederick Schiller saw this as a kind of “aesthetic” or “sentimental” education directly facilitated by exposure to great works of music and literature, and essential to human flourishing. Later, in the late 19th century, English cultural critic Matthew Arnold provided what has become one of the most popular points of reference for perfectionist conceptions.

The whole scope of this essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all

⁵ This observation is sometimes made with respect to a tendency to favour “tangible” over “intangible” heritage. Tangible heritage includes buildings and artefacts, while intangible heritage includes the inherited cultural practices of groups e.g. stories transmitted through oral culture, and aesthetic styles transmitted through visual culture, which themselves give meaning to particular objects. The tendency to favour tangible heritage is attributed to states, and to dominant heritage discourse. Laurajane Smith argues that “there is a dominant Western discourse about heritage, which I term the ‘authorized heritage discourse’, that works to naturalize a range of assumptions about the nature and meaning of heritage. Although this discourse is inevitably changing and developing, and varies in different cultural contexts and over time, there is nonetheless a particular focus and emphasis – primarily the attention it gives to ‘things’” (Smith 2006, p. 4, see also Harrison 2013).

the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits ... (Arnold 1869, viii)

Arnold's conception of culture thus assigns higher value to particular cultural goods— "the best that has been thought and said"—which are seen as useful or necessary for our flourishing. It should be noted that Arnold's writing is egalitarian in one dimension. He says that culture "seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light". However, the aspiration to promote a singular canon of cultural goods licenses paternalistic cultural policies, and some may see Arnold as having articulated the moralising culture of Victorian England.

The definitions of culture that arose in twentieth century anthropology and sociology, by contrast, emphasised culture as a "way of life" that all societies possessed. The definition of culture provided by Edward Tylor was instrumental to these developments.

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (1871, p. 1)

Although marking a transition away from purely perfectionist definitions which denied the existence of culture in some groups, it is useful to note how Tylor's account still faces two problems (Geertz 1973). First, he describes culture as a "complex whole" (p. 1) and said that whole nations "have a special dress, special tools and weapons, special laws of marriage and property, special moral and religious doctrines" (p. 11). Second, his conception still endorses a hierarchical ranking of cultures, as more or less evolved.

The thesis which I venture to sustain, within limits, is simply this, that the savage state in some measure represents an early condition of mankind, out of which the higher culture has gradually been developed or evolved, by processes still in regular operation as of old, the result showing that, on the whole, progress has far prevailed over relapse. (Tylor 1871, p. 28)

An important takeaway, here, is that sociologically informed conceptions of culture do not necessarily escape concerns of reification and paternalism that perfectionist accounts attract (see e.g. Benhabib 2002, p. 60). They can face these problems by suggesting that (1) different societies or social groups have clear boundaries, and thus that culture is static, lacks internal contestation, and that people cannot belong to multiple cultural groups, or (2) some cultures are better in some respect.

By contrast, my conception of cultural goods avoids these problems because it does not assume that social groups and societies have fixed traditions, clear boundaries, or a distinct way of life,

or that people belong only to one culture. It leaves room for cultural goods to be interpreted and evaluated along external dimensions—such as the extent to which they reflect and support people’s agency, and self-respect—but does not build these into the definition itself.

Another advantage of framing cultural goods sociologically is that it encourages a more open-ended exploration of the relationship between public policies and culture. If we take cultural goods to include only a fixed range of goods, this restricts the range of policies we can recognise as “cultural”. Laws and policies that affect spending on parks, tax-breaks on local sporting clubs, and the availability of sporting equipment, can be conceived as cultural policies. So can laws and policies that affect access to land for Indigenous groups, laws that restrict live music by imposing expensive licenses expenses on venues, and the regulation of social media. By restricting the field of analysis to a limited range of goods, we can fail to see how a wide range of government activity shapes an evolving cultural environment.

This observation invites an important caveat. On the one hand, my sociological conception of cultural goods allows for the study of cultural policies open-endedly. On the other hand, my project is focused on goods related specifically to *art and cultural heritage*. Given my open-ended definition of cultural goods, what justifies this scope? I am interested in studying policies that affect valuing practices in these specific areas because they (a) play a significant role in liberal societies, (b) are problematised in contemporary liberal thought, and (c) have largely escaped systematic philosophical analysis, despite all of this. I do not make any presumption of the superior value of art and heritage-related practices compared to other cultural activities, e.g. sport.

Finally, it is worth noting one of the wider payoffs of thinking about cultural goods in this way. While a perfectionist conception of cultural goods emphasises their intrinsic value, a sociological conception focuses on their role in the lives of social groups by considering their wider social effects. So a sociological understanding is more amenable to a ‘topographical’ or ‘zoomed out’ cultural analysis, where we focus less on e.g. individual artworks and genres, and more on what role they play in shaping culture overall. This mode of studying cultural goods—and by extension, cultural policies—is consistent with the way many other goods and public policies are often analysed, e.g. as making a contribution not only to individual lives, but to particular social groups and perhaps to region or society overall. And by taking this step, we are in a better position to theorise the sense in which cultural policies contribute to “public goods”.

This is an important upshot. On the one hand, the idea that funding for arts and heritage provides “public goods” is often stressed in public debate. On the other hand, the exact nature of this connection is rarely spelled out. As we start digging into *how* it might be spelled out, we run into a series of contradictions. Even in philosophical writing, many of the figures who want to defend the value of cultural policies on *non-instrumental* grounds, make the claim that cultural policies supply collective or public goods (e.g. Dworkin 1985, Raz 1986, Anderson 1993). A

public good is something which is relatively *nonexcludable*: once it exists for one person, it exists for everyone in their region. It is also relatively *nonrival*: one person's consumption of it is not meant to alter another person's ability to consume it. For example: clean air is meant to have these properties, and so public policies which provide and protect clean air might supply a public good.

This means that if we value clean air, we might (by extension) value the policies that bring it about. Importantly, this involves valuing those policies *instrumentally*. There is therefore a *prima facie* tension between appealing to the value of arts funding in supplying a larger, publicly accessible, commonly valuable good, and a resistance to seeing the value of arts funding in instrumental terms. Irrespective of the kind of theory of cultural value we might adopt, the relation between cultural goods and public goods is in need of explanation. I develop a general theory of the relationship between particular policies, and distinctive features of public culture, in [Chapter 1](#). And in [Chapter 2](#), I explore how a *prima facie* fair way of making cultural goods “public”—by making museums free at the point of entry—can be inequalitarian and damaging.

3. Cultural and Technological Change

Smart phones, social media and streaming services are altering the way many people engage with cultural goods. Three decades ago, most audience members at concerts wouldn't have owned a phone, had a social media account, or ever used a streaming platform. These technologies are now integral to the way consumers hear about, share, and appreciate music. Similar points could be raised in relation to practically *any* artistic genre in contemporary democratic societies. Consider e.g. how audiobooks and e-books are affecting literary consumption; how social media is driving the popularity of dance routines; how Instagram is mainstreaming digital photography; how television streaming services are globalising film content.

It seems no exaggeration, then, to say that how we produce, and experience culture is undergoing fundamental, real-time changes (Giaccardi 2012). However, this dissertation engages with cultural goods through a materialist framework that largely ignores these developments. By “materialist framework”, I mean that I am focused on cultural goods (e.g. visual artworks, musical performances, literary works, and their associated practices) in which physical objects and places play a defining role (e.g. paintings and museums, books and libraries, instruments and music venues, and cultural practices surrounding natural landscapes). A “digitalist framework” would instead focus on cultural goods that directly implicate digital spaces e.g. social media, streaming services, and AI. Although the subject matter can overlap, my materialist focus leads me to consider the distribution of physical cultural infrastructure such as museums, galleries, and music venues, rather than questions about the regulation of smartphones, social media, streaming services, and AI.

This is for two reasons. First, this dissertation is partially framed by debates that were formed before these technologies came into existence and inherits their material focus. Second, because the questions that these debates generate persist throughout the current technological revolution. This is both because (a) institutions dealing with material culture—e.g. museums, archives, heritage bodies, and libraries—still have a partially materialist purpose (documenting or preserving real artefacts) that survives digital cataloguing, and (b) some of the distinctive ethical-political concerns raised by digitalist institutions overlap with the concerns of raised by these materialist institutions.

Let me unpack this. The institution that this dissertation refers to the most is the museum. Digital archiving, the internet, and social media have already significantly changed the ways museums aim to reach audiences, and how audiences engage with museums. But they have not removed the desire to engage with “real” things (Korsmeyer 2016). New technologies have highlighted distinctive philosophical questions relating to e.g. the ethics of replicas, AI-generated art, and the unique value of encounters with human-made artefacts (Geismar 2018). But they have not resolved questions about how cultural goods fit within a public goods framework, how cultural goods can represent social groups and why this might be of ethical importance. Nor has the presence of the internet removed concerns of distributive fairness and agency, since most of the world still lacks access to stable and reliable internet, and streaming services and online archives have not restructured creative economies to empower disadvantaged regions or groups.

So while I don’t take up issues relating to the regulation of social media, or copyright and AI, the concerns that I raise in this dissertation around cultural recognition, distributive fairness, and agency over how we are represented, provide basic building blocks for work on cultural goods with a more digital ontology. Some of the ethical questions that new technologies raise appear to be restatements of pre-existing questions, which were themselves the subject of neglect. For instance, concerns of *content*: Should states place content quotas on social media, to help ensure that distorting, inaccurate and disrespectful cultural representations do not consistently dominate online spaces? Second, concerns of *fair access*: How can we collectively ensure that digital platforms are not just legally accessible to all citizens, but that all citizens have a fair chance at being able to use them for their own legitimate ends? Third, questions about *cultural justice*: What considerations might discourse analysis of online spaces raise for theories of justice? Finally, *democratic considerations* of the digital commons: Are digital technologies, and the discourses they popularise, made more legitimate by the fact that they are popular among a majority or a marginalised group? None of these questions are explored explicitly. However, across the four chapters of this thesis, I address the core principles and ideals that they invoke.

4. Cultural Policies Historically

Many liberal states have political roots in monarchies and colonial regimes that largely used cultural goods to assert power. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel marks an important moment in the history of arts funding, where Pope Julius II commissioned some of the defining works of the Italian Renaissance. But although Michelangelo's works are aesthetically magnificent, they also reflect a fundamentally illiberal model of arts funding in which theocrats determine what goes on the city's walls. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert are also remembered for bringing arts and culture to the masses of England through institutions like the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the Great Exhibition of 1851. But they were also colonial rulers who entrenched the class system, and this was fused into their cultural agenda.

Of course, some contemporary liberal states (e.g. France, America, Switzerland, the Netherlands) are republics descending from revolution. However, their traditions of state cultural patronage are still historically connected with oligarchic purposes, rather than emancipation of oppressed groups. Louis XIV was formative in the development of several of France's contemporary cultural institutions, including *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, *Opéra National de Paris*, and *Château de Versailles*. But he also embraced absolute power, and his cultural extravagance kept peasants impoverished. In short, many illiberal regimes have commissioned and amassed breathtaking art while committing gross atrocities. Any effort to defend state support for art and heritage has to be conscious of this history or otherwise fail to appreciate the risks of allowing states to decide what kinds of cultural goods it should promote and why (Weber 2025).

To be sure, the story is also complicated. Western states have used cultural festivals and centres to foster trade, mark religious and political events, and to attain popular political support. These activities no doubt contributed rare leisure and feelings of wonder to many people's lives. But to describe these as unqualifiedly positive events is to fail to think critically about the way cultural goods were used to entrench class hierarchies and maintain state power. Even in post-revolutionary Europe, when the ideals of liberalism were being codified, state support for cultural goods largely functioned to support the cultural practices of elites, project power and prestige, and as a way of governing the citizenry by bringing them in line with new values. As European museums and concert halls expanded entry to the working classes, their programming, staff, and geographic placement usually remained stable. Newly founded public museums—like The British Museum (est. 1753), and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam (est. 1864, initially known as the Koloniaal Museum, i.e. the Colonial Museum)—would display looted objects from colonial outposts to visiting citizens in large, impressive buildings. Objects from elsewhere would be represented in a hierarchical way, compared and contrasted with more developed and refined tastes of enlightened society. Beyond ethnographic museums, visual art and design were also being made more accessible for the European working classes, but this was often for explicitly Arnoldian reasons, of hoping to improve public taste and behaviour. This edificatory aim

involved an arbitrary exercise of power not simply because it imposed standards of taste and behaviour decided by ruling elites, but because those standards were unreasonable. They failed to represent the cultures of the working class and often reflected a colonialist outlook (Bennett 1995, 1998).

This dissertation examines cultural institutions and policies that emerged in post-war liberal states, where it might seem like the power dynamics governing cultural policies were very different. Indeed, I am about to argue that they are. However, if this history should issue guidance to political theorists, it is to acknowledge that cultural policies are not an inherently liberal or progressive policy, even if they strike their contemporaries that way. In this light, it's worth noting the optimistic tone of the most recent systematic work on this topic:

[C]ontemporary practices of state support for museums—which take place against a background of greater inequalities than would be present in a well-ordered perfectionist society—have not tended to create significant strains of commitment for the worst-off. Certainly, these moderately perfectionist policies do not appear to have caused the worse-off to ‘grow distant from political society’, to ‘retreat into [their] social world’ or to become ‘withdrawn and cynical’ to any noticeable degree. (Tahzib 2022, p. 114)

I agree with Tahzib that anti-perfectionist liberals have overstated concerns about arts funding. At the same time, Tahzib's statement isn't critical-minded enough about the way that state-supported cultural institutions can have a marginalising effect on the oppressed, or confer benefits on elites. For example, the museum that receives the most state funding in the United Kingdom, where Tahzib's book was partly written, is the British Museum. It is the subject of well-known claims from marginalised groups for the repatriation of cultural goods, the severing of ties with BP, and increased collaboration with source communities. Questions might also be raised—as they are in this thesis—about the justifiability of funding such institutions given that the most nationally disadvantaged groups will hardly ever visit them. In order to defend the progressive aspects of museums and cultural policies, we need to first identify what they are. We need to carefully consider which features distinguish liberal and illiberal methods of supporting culture and avoid oversimplifying generalisations. Otherwise, we fail to discriminate between policies which worsen and improve the situation of marginalised groups.

5. The Post-War Period

This thesis studies real-world cultural policies but also constructs historically informed generalisations about them, for the sake of idealised philosophical research. These idealisations are shaped by reflection on the more progressive aspirations of arts and cultural heritage laws that emerged in the aftermath of World War II. This period saw the development of a range of

international institutions committed to protecting the equal rights of individuals by building cooperation and stability between and within liberal states (e.g. the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund). In many states, there was a new commitment to nation-building through public expenditure that established social welfare systems, free education, and affordable housing. In this context, new experiments in arts and cultural heritage funding played out, some of which embraced ideals of self-determination, cultural diversity, and collaboration.

An historically informed account of this is incomplete without an acknowledgement of what was occurring on the world stage, especially in the United Nations (Harrison 2013, Meskell 2018). Formed in 1944, the United Nations encouraged member states, through diplomatic pressure, and norms and duties of international law, to provide conditions conducive to promoting and protecting cultural goods of various kinds, including world heritage sites and culturally diverse art.

This process began in 1948 with the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article 27 of the UDHR made two assertions of universal cultural rights. The first concerns a right to participate in cultural life: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”. This is often taken to mean that individuals have a right to participate in the production of culture and scientific research. The second assertion of Article 27 concerns intellectual property rights claims over cultural materials: “Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author”. These claims are open to interpretation, and do not assign enforceable duties to any particular actors. However, they have been invoked by a range of cultural institutions to help explain the moral significance of their work.

Among the institutions that draw on Article 27 is the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which was established to promote international peace and security through collaborative international projects in education, science and culture. Much of UNESCO’s work is relevant to understanding the cultural politics of post-war liberal states, but three further events stand out.

First is UNESCO’s 1966 “Declaration on the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation”, which outlined rights and principles for equal cultural respect between nations. Notable Articles include:

- Article 1.1: “Each culture has a dignity and value which must be respected and preserved.”

- Article 4.2: “The aims of international cultural co-operation in its various forms, bilateral or multilateral, regional or universal, shall [include] ... Bring[ing] about a better understanding of each other’s way of life.”
- Article 4.4: “To enable everyone to have access to knowledge, to enjoy the arts and literature of all peoples, to share in advances made in science in all parts of the world and in the resulting benefits, and to contribute to the enrichment of cultural life.”

Together, these statements affirm tolerance and respect for cultural diversity, as brought about by preserving all cultures (1.1), promoting cross-cultural understanding (4.2), and a presumptive right of equal access to cultural goods from everywhere (4.4).

In 1972 UNESCO adopted the World Heritage Convention, in which it framed the activities of world heritage listings as advancing these goals of international cooperation by pluralistically recognising the “outstanding universal value” of global cultural goods. Importantly, this convention imposes a range of duties, for “identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations” of items it defines as cultural heritage, including “monuments, architectural works”, “groups of buildings”, and “archaeological sites” deemed to be of outstanding universal value (Harrison 2013, Meskell 2018).

More recently, UNESCO has made a series of commitments to cultural diversity, which it now takes to be central to its overall mission. Its statements here affirm the fact of “reasonable pluralism” that liberal thinkers like Raz, Nussbaum and Rawls emphasise, and recommend diversity-related cultural initiatives as a way of ensuring that liberal democratic values persist within this pluralism. Article 2 of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2002) states,

In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the nourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life. (UNESCO 2002, p. 13)

For all the criticism that the UN faces, as a toothless organisation, documents like this still stand out as symbolically significant achievements. The document has 11 other Articles and was unanimously signed by all 185 Member States. But while all of this has developed in international diplomatic forums, liberal states over the past three decades have grappled with heated debates about the meaning and value of multiculturalism, and many political parties have retreated from a focus on inclusion and diversity that was common in the 1990s and early 2000s. Philosophy appears to have mirrored this trend, at least insofar as it has retreated from discussions of “multiculturalism”. This raises interesting questions (including about the causal

relationship between what is said at the UN and what transpires domestically, which I set aside) about the normative foundations of multiculturalism—and related values of mutual respect and understanding—that now need to be addressed head on.

6. Multiculturalism and the Imperative of Integration

Cultural difference is a key theme of this dissertation. But this concept, and the diversity-based policies it promotes, face ethical and conceptual challenges: (1) cultural essentialism, (2) cultural assimilation, and (3) the tendency to obscure the politics of redistribution. Many of these challenges have been developed in liberal debates about multiculturalism. Before discussing how these concerns apply to this dissertation, then, it's worth explaining what multiculturalism means in this context.

As a liberal political ideal, multiculturalism is straightforward (Song 2024). It begins by acknowledging the facts of pluralism: most liberal democracies today have culturally diversifying populations. Many different groups are likely to share meaningful social differences e.g. in their beliefs about religion, sexuality, gender roles, preferred career choices, and how they navigate public spaces. Some of these groups, because of their minority status, will face much more pressure to assimilate themselves into dominant culture. The pressure to assimilate therefore threatens the basic freedom of individuals to freely govern their own lives. There is then a normative claim. Out of respect for the freedom and equality of individuals, social groups should be supported to sustain their distinctive cultural practices unless this places unfair burdens on fellow citizens. Living with social difference is a collective challenge that we should manage together.

But this ideal faces at least three challenges: cultural essentialism, cultural assimilation, and avoiding redistribution. All of these issues merit consideration and shape the intellectual framework of this thesis. The first concern is that the concept of cultural difference cannot be made sense of without presupposing that significant cultural differences exist between different cultures. The risk is that this presupposition exaggerates those differences, and thereby poses obstacles to forming common bonds. If I assert that Muslims and Christians are destined to have difficulties understanding each other, I begin from an overly rigid starting place that fails to account for the fact that these groups can have unclear boundaries, and that intergroup relationships are not fixed but evolving. If I start entertaining policy commitments from this rigid starting point, I also run “the risk of privileging one allegedly pure version of that culture, thereby crippling its ability to adapt to changes in circumstances” (Song 2024). In the worst-case scenario, my diagnosis becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. By focusing purely on what makes us different from one another, we can be trained to see each other as innately different; mutually

incomprehensible. This is the challenge of cultural essentialism, as developed in the literature on multiculturalism.

This thesis navigates these concerns by refusing the simplistic assumption that people from different cultural backgrounds necessarily have intractable or stable differences. I embrace the view that cultural meaning and practices are evolving, and hence I reject the view that differences arising between groups are stable. In recognising that factors including class, race, and gender construct barriers to common understanding and connection, we should resist adopting an inherently pessimistic view, on which meaningful social differences are bound to place us into unassailable disagreements and political opposition. This is not just because pessimism is unhelpful; it is because this position is epistemologically flawed. Groups typically lack clear boundaries. They have internal disagreement. To say otherwise is to adopt an essentialist view of groups that reifies them and fails to accommodate their fluidity and dynamism (Young 2000 p. 88, Gilroy 1993).

But we should also resist another tendency, which is to deny meaningful differences, or to aspire to eliminate their relevance. Doing so gives rise to the objection of cultural assimilation. To be sure, the erosion of differences under the guise of inclusivity sounds obviously bad. However, the problem is not always easy to notice. What could be so bad with aspiring, for instance, to common citizenship; a world in which our differences do not separate us? As Jeff Spinner-Halev writes: “The mantra of a common citizenship can easily be misused, particularly as an excuse to try to force people to assimilate into the common culture” (2000 p. 327). Similarly, what could be so bad about fighting racial segregation by incentivising social integration in formerly segregated neighbourhoods? As José Medina argues, there is a “sense of integration often used in the literature, which requires that our institutions and public spaces lose any form of group specificity—the stronger version of this being the melting-pot model of multiculturalism” (2013, p. 9). “Melting-pot” models of multiculturalism, as Medina understands them, prescribe a process whereby groups contribute elements of their distinctive cultures towards a new, shared culture. To be sure, this outlook relies partly on the anti-essentialist view of cultural difference that I have already defended, and which I suspect Medina holds as well. The ethical criticism of melting-pot views, though, is not necessarily that a culturally heterogeneous society *cannot* gradually become a more homogenous one, or even that a more homogenous society will necessarily place citizens in relations of disrespect. The main worry about melting-pot theories, rather, is that they fail to respect the autonomy of social groups. They justify a process whereby groups forgo what makes them distinct, even if this runs against their wishes. In doing so, they provide legitimacy not only to assimilatory policies, but also to the broader cultural, political and economic forces that marginalise minorities, by encouraging them to adopt the practices of dominant groups and allowing dominant groups to appropriate minority practices wherever they see fit.

The conception of groups that I am working with in this thesis is one that accepts that some individuals, owing to their common histories, experiences and beliefs, share meaningful differences and similarities from each other, even though these things are not static. This conception of social groups is informed by the work of Iris Marion Young (1990), and sociological responses to Will Kymlicka's work on cultural justice (see e.g. Benhabib 2002).⁶ Normatively, I am committed to developing frameworks that assist citizens to develop mutual understanding and respect for one another without arbitrarily (a) eliminating feelings of difference or (b) limiting the freedom of individuals to form and maintain cultural associations with one another (cf. Young 2000, p. 225).

I put these insights into action in [Chapter 4](#). There, I develop an epistemic theory of cultural democracy which accommodates the importance of public and semi-public spaces for cultural dialogue. I argue that although there are shared benefits to achieving cultural integration in major museums, these should never come at the cost of cultural assimilation. To mitigate this, liberal states should commit not only to collaborative and inclusive programs in mainstream public venues—e.g. national archives, museums, libraries—but also independent, community-led institutions. However, I argue that the democratic goals of these institutional models can converge. If a society wants to enjoy authentic speech in popular venues that reflects critical insights of consciousness-raising, then it has a collective interest in protecting the spaces that foster it. These are, far and away, local, community-led spaces, rather than major museums and radio stations. This means supporting community radio, museums, and archives, so that critical voices don't feel pressure to assimilate into popular spaces.

A final objection to focusing on cultural differences is that this distracts from “a politics of redistribution” (Fraser 2003). The central concern here is that the marginalisation of oppressed groups is largely driven by “the economic structure of a capitalist society”, rather than a lack of cultural recognition and support (Fraser 2003, p. 24). If this is right, then from the perspective

⁶ Kymlicka argues (1) that individuals have an interest in being able to develop and exercise autonomy, (2) that they cannot do this without having access to a range of options, (3) that “societal cultures” play an integral role in this, by providing “the contexts of choice”, and (4) therefore, insofar as liberal states have a responsibility to promote and protect autonomy, they have a legitimate role in supporting “societal cultures”. The sociological critique of Kymlicka attacks his conception of societal cultures under (3). Kymlicka understands a societal culture as something “which provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres. These cultures tend to be territorially concentrated, and based on a shared language” (Kymlicka 1995, p. 76). His critics have argued that this implies an overly homogenous and bounded understanding of culture. Seyla Benhabib argues: “Any complex human society, at any point in time, is composed of multiple material and symbolic practices with a history. This history is the sedimented repository of struggles for power, symbolization, and signification—in short, for cultural and political hegemony carried out among groups, classes, and genders. There is never a single culture, one coherent system of beliefs, significations, symbolizations, and practices, that would extend ‘across the full range of human activities’” (Benhabib 2002, p. 60). While this criticism has informed my own thinking, it is worth noting that Kymlicka anticipates it, by writing that “societal cultures ... is a potentially misleading term, since it suggests an overly formal and rigid picture of what ... is a very diffuse and open-ended phenomenon. Cultures do not have fixed centres or precise boundaries” (Kymlicka 1995, p. 83).

of justice, multicultural policies will often or always be a bad use of resources. Critics might concede that there are *some* benefits in fostering awareness of diverse cultures and experiences. However, greater visibility and awareness doesn't put food on the table, keep kids in school, fund jobs or build hospitals for structurally disadvantaged groups. In fact, it may even make things worse, by giving a false impression that background inequalities are being dealt with, or that they ultimately don't matter, because social groups respect one another, regardless (Barry 2001).

How might we respond to these concerns? I fully accept that many of the problems that generate and sustain wrongful disadvantage relate to e.g. employment, housing, and access to education and healthcare. These challenges are not usually solved through policies that promote art and cultural heritage, or at least not in any direct or efficient way. However, rather than posing a knock-down argument to cultural policies, these concerns instead encourage their advocates to appropriately qualify their arguments. This invites an important question: What is the relationship between cultural policies and distributive injustice?

Nancy Fraser's work, although not written from within the liberal tradition, offers a useful point of reference. Fraser defends a rough distinction between injustices of "misrecognition" and "maldistribution", that can be interpreted as a rough distinction between cultural and distributive injustices. She argues, for example, that gays and lesbians often face forms of injustice that owe primarily to patterns of communication and interpretation, rather than to the economic structure of a society.⁷ Fraser acknowledges the widespread discrimination that LGBTQ+ individuals are liable to face across economic, legal and political institutions. Her point is just that the root-cause of these lies largely in patterns of cultural valuing practices, as opposed to the arrangement of our economic and legal institutions.

There is room for debate about which kinds of cases are best placed in each category. But Fraser's point is clear enough, and it has two upshots. First, that some forms of structural injustice require cultural intervention. The path to justice for some oppressed groups requires recognition of the value of their lives, in addition to any redistributive efforts it may also require. Second, even cases that strike us as more predominantly "economic" or "maldistributive" may also have cultural aspects. Working-class groups face obstacles to secure employment, housing, and social mobility. But "the resulting harms include misrecognition as well as maldistribution; and status harms that originated as by-products of economic structure may have since developed a life of their

⁷ She argues that "heteronormative value patterns structure broad swaths of social interaction", and this has the effect of constructing "gays and lesbians as a *despised sexuality*, subject to specific forms of *status subordination*" (Fraser 2003, p. 18). While this status subordination poses barriers to employment and often has legal counterparts e.g. marriage inequality, Fraser argues that these things stem primarily from patterns in communication and interpretation, rather than the economic structure of our societies. In support of this, she cites the fact that many LGBTQ+ individuals are liable to forms of discrimination regardless of their economic position. Specifically, she says, "homosexuals are distributed throughout the entire class structure of capitalist society, occupy no distinctive position in the division of labor, and do not constitute an exploited class" (p. 18).

own” (Fraser 2003, p. 23). In other words, the dominant cultural practices of a society can sustain the marginalisation that some oppressed groups face, by failing to call their experiences and histories to the attention of the wider citizenry, except by stigmatising them.

This dissertation does not rely on any neat distinction between economic and cultural injustice. However, like Fraser, I argue that some forms of injustice have cultural components. In particular, I argue that a lack of respect for cultural goods is one means by which structural injustice is created and sustained. Drawing on case studies from Indigenous Australian communities, I discuss these kinds of cases at length in [Chapter 3](#). Such cases demonstrate that cultural policies have an important place among the suite of policies that liberal theorists can advocate in response to structural injustices. They also illustrate the role that critical analysis of real-world cultural injustices can play in helping us understand what a just society would look like.

7. Chapter Outlines

The rest of this dissertation consists of four substantive chapters and a conclusion. Although these chapters were initially developed as distinct, self-contained chapters, they each take up normative questions about cultural policies and are thematically connected, and the dissertation aims to make them speak to one another.

In [Chapter 1](#), I provide a defence of diversity-based arts funding against a Rawlsian objection that it presumptively favours particular lifestyles, and is therefore unjustified. This “neutrality objection” is generated by a commitment to a neutrality principle, and a presumption that the best or only way to justify real-world arts funding arrangements is by appeal to an ideal like artistic flourishing. To address this objection, I argue that diversity-based arts funding contributes to a “culturally literate society” where we are all better placed to understand ourselves and each other. It does this by filling gaps in the cultural materials we have for understanding the histories, experiences, and beliefs of ourselves and others. However, considerations of fairness arise with respect to how we might promote cultural literacy.

In [Chapter 2](#), I consider one way in which liberal states have aimed to promote ideals of inclusivity in cultural institutions: making major museums free to enter. There is something intuitive in the idea that this improves access to culture. Free admissions remove barriers of access for less well-off groups, boost attendance, and can symbolise a commitment to equal access that is valuable in its own right. However, I argue that if we are aiming to prioritise the interests of less advantaged groups, the UK’s national policy of free entry is a surprisingly bad policy. Free admissions to major museums are subject to two *pro tanto* objections. First, they are ineffective to the degree that they consume/forgo resources that could be allocated towards other activities

that are presumptively more direct and cost-effective in targeting less advantaged groups (e.g. redistributive measures across regions; targeted programming; participatory outreach; free admission for target groups). Second, they are damaging because, and to the degree that, they protect/compound advantages over time. Taking this into account, I argue that we should be in favour of charging at London's major museums, to finance 'levelling up' across regions, and more direct access-promoting measures.

[Chapter 3](#) develops the groundwork for a new theory of cultural justice, based on my conception of cultural agency—our ability to shape the way we are represented, and to form appropriate convictions of our self-worth. This theory is developed out of a critique of a recent strand of liberal perfectionist thought. According to Perfectionist Justice, individuals have a right to flourish that cannot be realised without access to certain cultural goods. This view, defended independently by Cécile Fabre and Collis Tahzib, seems capable of both justifying cultural policies and assigning urgency to them. However, I argue that it fails to achieve either of these roles, because it fails to distinguish between policies that improve and entrench structural disadvantage. Drawing on case studies from Indigenous Australia, I argue that these explanatory gaps can be partially addressed by incorporating respect for cultural agency. This analysis furnishes us with a novel theory of cultural justice. But it also unravels an old myth. Liberal perfectionists do not have the upper hand in debates of cultural policies, because they lack the resources to discriminate between policies that improve and worsen the conditions of structurally disadvantaged groups.

[Chapter 4](#) develops a theory of cultural democracy built partially upon cultural agency. Why should museums open decisions to nonexperts? I argue that a common response to this question assumes an overly proceduralist view of democracy that fails to account for the ways in which cultural representation can go wrong. Drawing on standpoint epistemology, and James Clifford's theory of museums as contact zones, I defend a partially instrumentalist theory instead. On this view, nonexpert input into heritage decisions can assist in improving inaccuracies and distortions in the heritage commons, and in that way help us to represent and perceive each other's histories and cultures more accurately and respectfully. However, this reformed view faces a range of tricky objections. To address them, I develop a defence of the *Convergence Thesis*: the idea that the moral goals of democratisation can converge on the epistemic and aesthetic goals of cultural institutions. I argue that this convergence depends not only on harnessing epistemic diversity to improve the heritage commons, but also upon a commitment to independent cultural spaces that provide a more hospitable setting for counter-speech, consciousness-raising, and minority cultural expression.

[Chapter 5](#) concludes.

As mentioned, these chapters were initially developed as self-contained papers. While I have endeavoured to present them in something of a narrative form, some stylistic and tonal variation remains. This is due to the distinctive questions being addressed in each chapter, and the literature that has been harnessed to address them. For example, Chapters 1 and 3 are engaged with debates between perfectionists and anti-perfectionists, whereas these justificatory matters are not taken up in the other chapters.

Chapter 2 is partially a piece of non-ideal theory, or political science. It restricts argumentative attention to a single policy case study, and is not engaged with a foundational justificatory question, except for defending a prioritarian principle of distributive justice. Even the general kind of policy it examines—free admissions to cultural institutions—has largely escaped philosophical attention. In order to scaffold debate, this chapter carves out its own dialectical space through engaging with real-world public justifications.

Chapter 4 takes up another question which is largely neglected in the philosophical literature, about the relationship between democracy and heritage. Questions concerning cultural democracy could be of interest to democratic theory in the same way that workplace democracy and citizen science (i.e. the democratisation of science) have been. Those topics invite lively and interdisciplinary discussion. Given that this hasn't occurred yet in political philosophy, the literature drawn upon in Chapter 4 is drawn largely from museum and heritage studies.

8. Implications

One way of unifying what I'm doing across these different chapters is providing guidance on the question of what a comprehensive liberal theory of cultural justice should include. A theory of cultural justice can be implied within a political theory of liberal justice, insofar as it makes comments about cultural goods. However, it can also be a subject in its own right, given that some forms of injustice appear to have a distinctively cultural dimension. What are some of the elements that such a theory should account for?

First, there are concerns about *content*. Concerns of fairness arise in the selection of which cultural goods are preserved and promoted. These debates intersect with the politics of recognition, since the value of cultural goods is often tied to their being expressive of particular forms of life. Concerns of unfair representation arise, for instance, where particular social identities lack the approval of mainstream cultural venues. The history of modern American arts funding provides an illuminating example. In 1989, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was the subject of a polarizing debate over public support for 'controversial art', including work that explored the lives and sexual experiences of gay men during the AIDS epidemic. US Senator Jesse Helms argued that this use of funds was unjustifiable. Using the oeuvre of photographer

Robert Mapplethorpe to prosecute his case, he said to the New York Times: “This Mapplethorpe fellow ... was an acknowledged homosexual. He’s dead now, but the homosexual theme goes throughout his work” (Helms, quoted in Myer 2001, p. 292).

To offer another example, the BBC’s historic reluctance to give a prominent place to genres such as reggae, soul, and blues (and, more recently, hip-hop and grime) is criticised as a failure to adequately represent African-Caribbean communities in Britain (Hebdige 1987, pp. 144–46, Bradley 2013, pp. 388–406). Referring to the 1960s and 70s, the cultural historian Paul Gilroy writes that “the BBC was not interested in including African and Caribbean music in their programmes” (Gilroy 2013, p. 218). Other critics have made similar points about the decades that followed (see e.g. Bradley 2013 for an extensive discussion of grime). Of course, British Black communities are a heterogeneous and evolving group, without any fixed or unified set of tastes. But we can acknowledge the ways in which a minority group is excluded from dominant cultural institutions without denying their contested and evolving nature, by attending to their underrepresentation among the staff, consumers, and platformed artists found in mainstream venues.⁸ Theories of cultural justice ought to explain why these exclusions are problematic. My arguments demonstrate that they are problematic for a wide range of reasons. I develop public justifications for protecting and promoting access to prominent cultural venues, and for supporting cultural expressions that reflect the beliefs, experiences, and practices of minoritized groups more generally.

Second, there are concerns about *fair distributions of advantages*. Concerns of fairness arise in the questions about the geographic distribution of funding, such as the centrality of London in England, or of Stockholm in Sweden (Savage 2016). They also arise with respect to who is most likely to benefit from expenditure in any particular domain. These issues are particularly relevant to justice where cultural goods confer competitive advantages on consumers, such as through living in a cultural capital, or being raised in a family that values literature (Bennett et al. 2009, Brighouse and Swift 2014). There is an established tradition of examining these questions in sociology, and philosophers have explored the implications of this literature for educational justice (e.g. Brighouse and Swift 2006, 2014). In the context of cultural policies, though, these issues remain largely unexplored. My arguments show that any normative analysis of these policies needs to take social and geographic inequalities into account.

Third, there are concerns about *agency*. Concerns of fairness arise over the extent of meaningful participation in cultural production. Whereas the first concern relates to equality of access to a diverse range of cultural goods as consumers, a concern for cultural agency relates to our power to produce culture ourselves. The politics of cultural agency are activated, for instance, where a

⁸ In 2001, the BBC began to more actively address these concerns through the creation of Radio 1Xtra, which is devoted to “amplifying black music and culture”, and refers to itself as “a distinct voice of black British identity, using the music, culture and voices of the moment to represent” (BBC 2025).

social group lacks adequate influence over the media that expresses and portrays their identities (Young 1990, Taylor 1994, Fraser 2003). They are also activated when a disadvantaged group lacks the ability to govern the cultural goods that sustain its cultural practices (Iverson 2020, Matthes 2024). These points are examined by postcolonial theorists, and in work exploring the value of participating in art and cultural heritage. However, these perspectives have been largely ignored in liberal debates about the justifiability of arts and heritage funding. My arguments demonstrate that theories of justice should accommodate the principle of cultural agency, to ensure that people are culturally supported to develop their capacities for self-respect and self-formation. Liberal theorists may argue that this principle is not strictly necessary, given that they can draw on a range of existing resources to explain how cultural policies can respect these interests, and therefore not contribute to cultural marginalisation. However, to my knowledge, no liberal theorist has yet done the work of explaining how liberal principles of justice—e.g. the fair equality of opportunity principle, and the equal liberties principle—can recommend forms of arts and heritage funding that alleviate cultural marginalisation and recommend against those that worsen it. Therefore, besides developing a novel framework for theorising cultural injustices, my account of cultural agency also draws into focus a range of moral intuitions that alternative routes to justifying cultural policies will also have to accommodate.

Where does this leave us? These three themes—content, distribution, and agency—indicate ethical standards against which theories of cultural justice can be assessed. They aren't intended to be exhaustive. Rather, they specify some of the key elements that a comprehensive normative analysis of culture should include. Content, distribution, and agency are the themes that emerge through a thorough conceptual and ethical analysis of the forms that arts and heritage funding can take in post-war liberal states. While discussions of cultural justice may focus on other cases—e.g. accommodation for minority languages and religious practices, and the regulation of social media—we can presume that these concerns will still apply, because they relate to general considerations of fairness that arise through choices about which cultural goods to support.

Moreover, these considerations also provide us with critical tools for evaluating the fairness of real-world cultural policies. While this is not the kind of work that all political philosophers are drawn to, my arguments also demonstrate that this can be a fruitful philosophical exercise. It is a fruitful philosophical exercise in that it helps us to understand the role that culture can play in creating and sustaining a just society, and the evaluative concepts that are needed to bring this into view. It therefore helps us to develop and refine our understanding of culture and of justice, and their relationship in the world we live in.

1. Neutrality, Cultural Literacy, and Arts Funding

Cultural policies face a challenge of public justifiability. This chapter explores this issue in connection to arts funding specifically. How can liberal states support arts funding, if this favours particular ways of life? To address this question, I identify and defend a major theme of contemporary arts funding, namely, its focus on diversity. I argue that diversity-based arts funding is justifiable on the basis that it supports *cultural literacy*: our ability to understand ourselves and each other, despite our cultural differences. While some of these benefits can be enjoyed by those who make and consume art, they are also gained by those who don't, because arts funding affects the makeup of public spaces and the communicative practices that we all use to make sense of the world. Hence, I argue that diversity-based arts funding helps to generate the collective good of a more *culturally literate society*—a society in which citizens are relatively well placed to understand their own cultures, histories and experiences, and those of others.

1. Introduction

Public funding of the arts is a commonplace in post-war liberal societies. Many countries, including the UK, Canada, Australia, Germany, France, and the United States, allocate significant public funds to institutions supporting the visual, literary, and performing arts.⁹ The institutions funded under these measures have widened access to art museums and live artistic performances. They have also diversified the cultural materials available to citizens, over time, helping the arts to better reflect the histories, experiences, and worldviews that we find in multicultural societies.

But despite these attractive benefits, some philosophers question the justifiability of public arts funding in liberal democracies.¹⁰ They suggest that arts funding is unjustified because it favours

⁹ This includes the establishment of public cultural institutions such as state art galleries, music venues, and theatre companies, and state-sponsored grants and awards for artists, art projects and cultural institutions; tax-deductible donations and purchases, scholarships to study various artistic practices, and visas to attract and support artistic talent from abroad. Efforts to increase equality of access to the arts existed prior to this era. For example The Louvre in Paris and the V&A Museum in London were free to the public in the 19th century. What distinguishes public arts funding in the post-war era is a more thoroughly institutionalized programme of funding for a broader range of activities, and an increasingly diverse array of cultural materials. Other mechanisms for supporting the arts have also evolved during this period e.g. copyright laws and cultural heritage rights.

¹⁰ I will set aside a related objection to arts funding, namely, that the goods it serves aren't urgent enough to justify funding it while more urgent needs go unmet (for discussion see Miller 2004, Munoz-Dardé 2013). Another important criticism relates to the alleged neutrality of museums. It is argued that museums, especially museums aiming to be 'encyclopaedic' or 'universal' e.g. the British Museum and the Louvre, present a limited and biased view of human cultures and histories, and this is obscured by their claim to being universal or for everyone.

a particular conception of the good (Dworkin 1985, Carroll 1987, Black 1992, Rawls 1999), or because it is easily susceptible to that impression (Brighouse 1995). I will call this kind of critical standpoint the *Neutrality Objection* to public arts funding.¹¹

One concern behind some instances of the Neutrality Objection, e.g. from John Rawls, or Noël Carroll, is that much arts funding seems to be guided by a belief in the intrinsic value of an elitist (typically Eurocentric) artistic canon. For example, it seems unjustifiable to use appeals to intrinsic value to defend subsidies for ballet, if ballet is ultimately of no interest to most people.¹²

Worries about elitism seem less pressing today, given that much arts funding is now consciously aimed at widening the canon, and diversifying creative outputs and access.¹³ But even if the inclusivity ideals behind this shift were to be fully realized in arts funding, neutrality-based worries still remain. For one thing, many people don't like to visit galleries and theatres. And even among avid arts consumers, we see vigorous debates over what work deserves a platform in the publicly-funded gallery or theatre. Moreover, as Harry Brighouse argues (1995), arts funding decisions can create impressions of favouritism, in that they seem to pitch worldviews against one another, e.g. Christian v. Islamic art, mainstream v. queer theatre.

These concerns underpin subtler formulations of the Neutrality Objection, which apply just as much to diversified arts funding policies, as to traditional, elitist policies. My first aim in this chapter is to explain and respond to these trickier Neutrality Objections.

Of course, one can dispense with the Neutrality Objection entirely, if one believes that liberal democratic justice simply isn't committed to the type of neutrality ideals that the objections invoke (see e.g. Raz 1986, Black 1992, Wall 1998, Tahzib 2022). However, I think much public arts funding can meet the demands of a plausibly formulated neutrality principle, and that the objections can therefore be answered without severing ties between neutrality and liberal democratic justice. My second aim here is to defend this position. I argue that (many) present-

Relatedly, concerns are raised about the ethical standing of museum collections due to unjust acquisition of objects and fair claims to repatriation (see e.g. Thompson 2013, Matthes 2017, cf. Appiah 2010, Lindsay 2012). Because my focus here is on the topic of arts funding more generally, I will not be addressing these concerns.

¹¹ Various defenders of liberal neutrality, like Carroll (1987), Brighouse (1995), and Barry (2002, p. 198) explicitly cast doubt on our capacity to justify arts funding on suitably neutral grounds. But some critics of liberal neutrality are similarly doubtful, including Raz (1986), Black (1992), Wall (1998) and Tahzib (2022). The Neutrality Objection is also implicitly asserted when liberals describe arts funding as "perfectionist" (e.g. Quong 2011, p. 4, 89–91) as opposed to a policy favoured by perfectionists.

¹² E.g. consider the following from Rawls (1999): "principles of justice do not permit subsidizing... opera and the theater, on the grounds that these institutions are intrinsically valuable, and that those who engage in them are to be supported even at some significant expense to others who do not receive compensating benefits" (pp. 291–92). In later work (e.g. 2001, pp. 151–52) Rawls is more sympathetic to perfectionistic defences of public arts funding.

¹³ Throsby (2010, pp. 173–80) provides an overview of these developments from the 1950s to the present context, including the influence of UNESCO's 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Anderson (2019) discusses how cultural diversity has affected museums in Europe, the UK, the United States, and Australasia (see also Nightingale and Mahal 2012).

day arts funding policies and programs can, given their focus on diversity, be justified in accordance with a neutrality principle, because of the role that they play in creating a *culturally literate* society, and our interests in cultural literacy. I argue that a culturally literate society is a non-excludable good we all have an interest in, along with more familiar public goods like security and clean air.

The payoff of this account is that it answers the Neutrality Objection. But in addition, in thinking about how cultural literacy is fostered by public arts funding, we can draw some broader insights about how activities that are private, in an important sense, still contribute to non-excludable goods. My cultural-literacy-based account of the benefits of arts funding picks up on themes in the work of Ronald Dworkin (1985) and Joseph Raz (1986). But I extend their defence of arts funding, in a liberal society, partly in my reply to objections from Quong and Brighouse, and partly by developing a more refined account of the particular value artistic expressions impart to our shared hermeneutical resources.

In [Section 2](#), I outline a version of the Neutrality Objection based on a Neutrality of Aim principle. In [Section 3](#) I argue that the key to answering this objection is to explain how arts funding contributes to goods whose benefits are non-excludable and publicly valuable. Because it borrows from the framework of public goods, I call this the “public goods strategy” for justifying public arts funding.

In [Section 4](#) I address two objections to the public goods strategy, from Quong and Brighouse. First, I argue that Quong’s doubts about the arts contributing to such goods is based on a mistaken view about the relation between individually beneficial activities and non-excludable goods. Second, I address Brighouse’s argument that some discretionary public goods are presumptively nonneutral and unjustified. I show how Brighouse relies on an overly rigid distinction between discretionary and nondiscretionary policies, whereby suspicions of partiality are always warranted for the former, but not the latter.

In [Section 5](#) I explain how public arts funding advances cultural literacy, by helping provide hermeneutical resources that improve cross-cultural understanding. I argue that while arts funding is not the only means of promoting cultural literacy, it can effectively contribute to the characteristics of a publicly valuable, non-excludable good—a culturally literate society—to such an extent that it earns a public goods-styled rationale. Finally, I address a series of objections to this proposal.

2. The Principle of Neutrality and the Neutrality Objection

The principle of neutrality says that the state should only exercise its powers in ways that are neutral between different conceptions of the good. Perfectionism, for our purposes here, at least, is the denial of this. The core argument for this principle is that citizens have reasonable disagreements about what a good life consists in, and that the state shouldn't take sides in these disagreements, because this fails to treat citizens as free and equal. To express the idea in Rawlsian jargon, neutrality is an appropriate constraint on state action, given the fact of reasonable pluralism.¹⁴ For example, if the state mandates observance of the Sabbath, thereby imposing a certain religious worldview, it disrespects the ability of citizens to govern their own lives, based on their own worldviews. It treats them paternalistically (Nussbaum 2011, Quong 2011).

In what follows I will assume that an ideal of neutrality does indeed set constraints on state action in a liberal polity. I'll be arguing that a cultural-literacy-based rationale for public arts funding satisfies the demands of a (plausibly formulated) neutrality principle. This will mainly be of interest to liberals who endorse such a principle, who I'll refer to as political liberals. But it should also be of some interest to liberal Perfectionists. The anti-paternalistic ideals that underpin the Neutrality Objection should still matter to the liberal who denies that these ideals necessitate compliance with a neutrality principle. Thus, in particular cases, a liberal Perfectionist state may have good reason to seek neutral justifications for certain policies (Clarke 2006).

It remains for us to specify precisely what a neutrality principle demands, in insisting that state action remain "neutral between different conceptions of the good". For the purposes of engaging with the Neutrality Objection, it will suffice to proceed with one commonplace specification.

NEUTRALITY OF AIM: state action must not aim to support any specific ways of life or conceptions of the good over (reasonable) others.

This doesn't disallow state action which *de facto* supports some ways of life or conceptions of the good over others. It disallows the state aiming at this outcome. State actions must be underpinned by aims and associated reasons that are neutral between reasonable conceptions of the good—aims and reasons one can accept, or not reasonably reject, irrespective of one's

¹⁴ Reasonable pluralism refers to the "profound and irreconcilable differences" between citizens' different moral, religious and philosophical ideals (Rawls 2001, p. 3–4). The presence of these disagreements, to Rawls, threatens the stability of liberal political societies. His theory Justice as Fairness hopes to stabilise this threat by theorising "basic institutions and public policy" in ways that do not intentionally favour any particular conception of the good, and can be endorsed by all reasonable people (p. 153 f. 27).

conception of the good (what are sometimes referred to as *public reasons*).¹⁵ Paradigm examples of such reasons reflect values that are linked to basic human needs. For instance, we all have an interest in living in an environment with low levels of pollution, and which faces a minimal threat of invasion. In acting to fulfil these common interests, e.g. through health and defence policies, the state may ultimately advantage some ways of life over others. But non-neutral effects like this are permitted by Neutrality of Aim, as long as they are not aimed at.

A further clarification is needed about the nature of shared or public reasons. I will understand the content of public reasons as necessarily consistent with basic liberal values of equality, freedom and fairness.¹⁶ In this sense, neutral aims are not established by *mere* common reasons or interests, in an empirical sense: just because some religious doctrine carries mass appeal does not make imposing it through law neutral. I will assume that suitably neutral reasons apply to our interests *qua* citizens in liberal democracies. These include interests in understanding political decisions (Brighouse 1995), but also, interests in viewing oneself, and being viewed by others, as free and equal (Quong 2011).

Finally, it's worth noting that political liberals disagree about the scope of neutrality. Some, including Rawls, think that it should only regulate "constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice" (1996). Others, such as Quong (2011), think that neutrality ought to regulate all political activity, including "everyday democratic decisions" about where and when to build a park or school (p. 43). At least in principle, Rawls's narrow neutrality leaves some scope for perfectionist reasoning in everyday political matters that don't relate to constitutional matters and rights. A broader constraint of neutrality, however, will say that unless arts funding can be given a neutral defence, it makes for an illegitimate usage of state power, even in the presence of majority support (p. 43). The kind of Neutrality Objection I am interested in answering in this chapter presupposes broad neutrality, such that if only perfectionist reasons can sincerely motivate defences of arts funding, then it's unjustified.¹⁷

Plausibly, the goals of public policies are reflected in the premises of the arguments used to justify them. Neutrality of Aim thus sets constraints on the premises of such arguments (Kramer

¹⁵ By "public reasons" I mean considerations that are "justifiable or acceptable" to all members of a reasonable public. These exclude sectarian moral, philosophical and religious ideals. Liberal democratic values such as freedom, equality and fair terms of social cooperation are seen as paradigmatic public reasons. This follows standard usage (for discussion, see Quong 2022).

¹⁶ Political liberalism, as developed by Rawls, states that these are central moral values shared among the family of reasonable political conceptions of justice.

¹⁷ Broad neutrality can be defended on the basis that there is no nonarbitrary reason to say that e.g. discretionary policies ought not to be subject to neutrality, if justice and basic rights are. While more could be said to motivate this requirement, I am intentionally presupposing it in order to engage with strong formulations of the Neutrality Objection.

2015).¹⁸ Arguments for public arts funding will not satisfy Neutrality of Aim, then, if their premises include controversial claims about value, that reasonable persons may reject. As Dworkin says,

No government should rely, to justify its use of public funds, on the assumption that some ways of leading one's life are more worthy than others, that it is more worthwhile to look at Titian on the wall than watch a football game on television. (Dworkin 1985, p. 222)

Inversely, a policy for public arts funding can be compliant with Neutrality of Aim, provided that it seeks to secure benefits that all reasonable members of the public have an interest in as citizens, rather than benefits that only matter to those who engage with art, or believe artistic experiences are a feature of the good life.

In addition to not including sectarian claims about the good, neutral justifications for a policy cannot rely on invalid or bogus reasoning. Their supportive arguments need to be coherent and sensitive to the available evidence (Rawls 1997, pp. 786–87). Moreover, the reasons in favour of a policy need to be sufficiently powerful such that they can be recognised as applicable, in light of the available evidence, to reasonable citizens of liberal polities irrespective of their religious, aesthetic and philosophical beliefs (Quong 2011, p. 42, 256). Importantly, this does not rule out the fact that citizens and public officials can have a range of reasons to support arts funding, some of which are non-public/Perfectionist. It just requires that they *sincerely* believe that arts funding can be assigned a neutral aim.¹⁹

While there are many ways in which sincerity could be assessed, for the purposes of this chapter, I take one to be particularly germane: Can it be shown, through a commonly accepted method of evaluating public policies, that a given policy or law provides an efficient and effective contribution towards the neutral end it is presumptively directed at? This requires specifying the distinctive nature of the contribution that e.g. arts funding makes towards some neutral aim, relative to known alternatives. If this cannot be shown, the sincerity of the 'neutral' justification is in reasonable doubt, such that not even proponents of arts funding could defend it in good faith once they possessed the available evidence about the other means by which the aims could be achieved.²⁰

¹⁸ In this sense, Neutrality of Aim, although a constraint on government action, connects directly to discussions of duties of public reason, or the kinds of arguments citizens should aim to use in favour of a government activity to one another. Rawls called this corresponding duty of citizens "the duty of civility". For useful discussion, see Quong (2011, p. 41) and Tahzib (2018, pp. 529–30).

¹⁹ I am here drawing from Quong's and Rawls's discussion of the sincerity condition in public reasoning.

²⁰ This sub-condition could also be read as a "Neutrality of Means" requirement.

Proponents of the Neutrality Objection don't think that there are justifying aims for arts funding that meet such a demand. For them, the fact that not everybody engages with art, or feels any interest in doing so, places a burden of proof on the funding advocate. They usually concede that there are some indirect justifications for selected instances of arts funding that can meet this demand, relating to public goods. For example, there may be an economic rationale for some forms of funding, grounded in our shared interest in public wealth. Some of the funding of the Metropolitan Museum plausibly pays for itself in broader economic benefits for New Yorkers, so all or most members of that society plausibly have some interest in its funding (Dworkin 1985, p. 224, Brighthouse 1995, p. 47). Or consider art that is constitutive of our civil infrastructure, like the designs of stamps and public buildings (Carroll 1987, p. 22). There is arguably a public interest in funding such art, in order to improve the objects citizens make use of in their daily lives.

But if arts funding was limited to policies which gain support from these justifications, most of its existing forms—which include support for art that doesn't draw large crowds or play a role in civic infrastructure—would turn out to be illegitimate. The question for the arts-funding advocate is whether there is a way to justify public support for work that is relatively obscure or unprofitable, and which doesn't seem to pay for itself in broader economic benefits.

3. Overcoming the Objection: A Public Goods Strategy

The argument that I'll be making, in response to the Neutrality Objection, centres on the claim that a well-resourced creative sector helps to create a public good. Before delving into the details of that claim, in this section I'll explain why it makes sense to adopt an argumentative strategy that focuses on public goods. To begin, we need to understand what they are.

3.1 *Public Goods and Neutrality*

Public goods are both *non-excludable* and *non-rivalrous*. A good is non-excludable if, once it exists for one person (at least, at some sufficient level), it exists for everyone. Clean air and national security are examples of non-excludable goods (Dworkin 1985, pp. 222–26, Raz 1986, pp. 198–99, Kramer 2015, pp. 4–6). When one person lives in a country with an effective defence force, so does every person who lives there. Similarly, when I live in a region with low levels of air pollution, everyone else in the region benefits from that same good as well.

A good is non-rivalrous if individuals can enjoy it without reducing the ability of other individuals to enjoy it (Kramer 2015, pp. 4–5). Clean air is non-rivalrous because, by breathing it, I don't reduce my neighbour's ability to breathe it. While putative public goods are rarely

perfectly non-excludable/non-rivalrous, goods are typically classed as public if they possess these properties to a high degree (Kramer 2015, p. 4). For reasons of scope, I will be focused on the *non-excludability* criterion of public goods in this chapter.

Public goods can create free-rider problems, which is part of what justifies the state's role in helping secure such goods (Dworkin 1985, Rawls 1999, p. 236, Quong 2011, pp. 88–89, Kramer 2015, p. 4). Everyone may have an interest in some pollution-reduction technology. But if no-one can be excluded from the good this technology promotes, e.g. cleaner air, then each person has an incentive to free-ride on other people's investment in the technology. This can lead to a scenario in which goods that we all have an interest in attaining are under-supplied, or where their costs are disproportionately shouldered by a limited group. State action to supply such goods, using public funds, is one way to ensure the adequate supply of such goods, on relatively fair terms.

However, it's not plausible to think that just because some good is non-rival and non-excludable, the state has a neutral aim in support of it. A theocratic state might provide things which are non-rivalrous and non-excludable, but which aren't sincerely defensible without recourse to a religious doctrine e.g. public broadcasting devoted entirely to religious services. Public goods can therefore lack public value in the relevant sense. In addition, not all the means of promoting a public good that is publicly valuable—like clean air—will seem effective and efficient enough, relative to known alternatives, to be sincerely defensible. So, if the framework of public goods is to provide a strategy for squaring arts funding with neutrality, the success of this strategy will rely on identifying a relevant subclass of public goods-styled policies, by virtue of belonging to which, arts funding could pass the neutrality test.

3.2 Publicly Valuable, Non-excludable Goods

My focus in the first instance is on classifying a set of *goods*, rather than policies/practices. The relevant subclass of public goods, for my purposes, have two features: they are *publicly valuable* and *non-excludable*. The connection between the requirements of neutrality and public value—given the latter's link to public reasons—might seem straightforward, but the usefulness of showing that a policy makes a certain good *publicly available* is less obvious. We can imagine neutrally justifiable policies, such as those which aim at correcting health inequalities, that don't explicitly aim at making a good available to everyone.²¹ Indeed, one way to establish the neutrality of arts funding, for political liberals, is to argue that it is required by justice, e.g. that there is a basic right to culture that a reasonable citizenry would recognise as non-perfectionist, and that

²¹ Of course, under some description, at some level of abstraction, they may. But non-excludability needn't be a normatively salient feature of a neutral policy.

arts funding answers to, or that arts funding is justified on grounds of fair equality of opportunity.²²

Public availability is a useful condition for discharging the Neutrality Objection because of a suspicion that arts funding mainly delivers private resources and/or is an ineffective or Perfectionistic way to address justice. Brighouse, for instance, considers the case for arts funding aimed at enlivening a poverty-stricken city, only to say that such programs would be inequalitarian, because they'd favour arts lovers, and "what is required is wholesale redistribution of wealth that will then be at the disposal of the residents of the inner city to do with what they will" (1995, p. 45). He qualifies that even if arts programs "represent an improvement in the direction of justice for the egalitarian", they don't deliver something that's *required* by justice, like health or housing: arts funding is instead "discretionary" (p. 45, see also Carroll, p. 30, Tahzib 2022, pp. 179–80, cf. Munoz-Dardé 2013).

But why might we want to say that discretionary spending, when it occurs, should aim at delivering something to the *whole* public? Consider what Scanlon says on the subject.

There are some benefits that governments can choose whether or not to provide. Public swimming pools, ice skating rinks, and golf courses might be examples. But if a government provides benefits of this kind it cannot make them legally available to only some citizens, and, I would say, it can be open to objection if it provides these facilities in a way that is accessible only to people in some neighborhoods. (Scanlon 2018, p. 17)

We can see how this sort of condition would apply to cultural goods, if we thought, like Carroll and Brighouse, that arts funding was discretionary. The worry would be that there are no public reasons to justify the goal of broadening arts access if some people don't want it (Rawls 1999, p. 250).²³

It's worth mentioning a compromise position between rejecting arts funding for this reason, and providing it on a limited basis. Governments can help make any given discretionary good available just to the citizens who want it, if and to the extent they're happy to pay for it. Rawls

²² Gingerich (2019) puts forward a rights-based argument, which places arts funding in the domain of Rawls's first principle, as answering to a basic right. Kymlicka (1989) also makes a justice-related argument for arts and cultural policy, though he articulates our interest in culture as an all-purpose interest or primary good, rather than as a right. There's also a thread of Dworkin's (1985) argument which appeals to "some duty, out of simple justice" to leave the "culture structure" we inherited "at least as rich as we found it" (p. 233).

²³ Rawls writes, "there is no more justification for using the state apparatus to compel some citizens to pay for unwanted benefits that others desire than there is to force them to reimburse others for their private expenses" (1999, p. 250).

proposed something similar in his “exchange branch” of government.²⁴ However, there are problems with this kind of divide-and-conquer approach which, I think, help illuminate the significance of Scanlon’s view.

If some discretionary goods are non-excludable, they will be susceptible to free riding from those who have opted not to pay tax towards them (Klosko 1987, Quong 2011, p. 89, Pamuk 2018, p. 7). If, on the other hand, there are ways to restrict public access to goods political liberals tend to classify as discretionary—e.g. by charging some people to enter ‘public’ parks unless they have, at an earlier time, paid to support for their upkeep—we may have ethical reasons *not* to. Such arrangements may conflict with the inclusive goals of a policy/institution. If those goals, for instance, were linked to providing public spaces, or promoting democratic or cultural literacy for all citizens, then their aspirations would seem contradicted by a scheme of intentionally unequal, tiered access.²⁵

It is the combination of the intuitions (a) that arts funding doesn’t seem to be required by justice and is therefore discretionary, and (b) that if governments are to provide discretionary goods, they should aspire to make them available to all, that makes a condition of non-excludability attractive. Writers like Carroll and Brighouse also indicate support for public goods policies without recourse to justice or perfection. If arts funding can be seen to contribute to a similarly non-excludable, publicly valuable good, then the force of the Neutrality Objection can be diffused by analogy.

4. Two Objections to the Public Goods Strategy

4.1 Quong’s Excludability Objection

But while political liberals have expressed sympathy towards this kind of strategy for discretionary spending, Quong and Brighouse have both made strong objections to it in the case of arts funding. Quong’s objection occurs within a wider argument against Liberal Perfectionists and isn’t explicitly motivated by a Neutrality Objection. However, it entails a key claim about the

²⁴ Rawls has been criticised for the infeasibility of this proposal, in which the public must decide, unanimously (or nearly unanimously) the extent to which certain goods should be provided and how much they each are willing to pay for them (e.g. Black 1992, Gutmann 1999, p. 260, Pamuk 2018, p. 7, Tahzib 2022, p. 179, cf. Klosko 1987). While I don’t discuss these issues here, I acknowledge that there are further questions as to the fairest method/s of taxation and implementation for discretionary policies, even if they possess a neutral justification in principle. My aim is to provide an in principle justification; in this section, it’s only to highlight the intuitive plausibility of Scanlon’s claim.

²⁵ Proposals to privatise areas of the BBC, in which only those with paid subscriptions would legally be able to consume content, suggest an example, e.g. if the programs being privatised are those aimed at increasing democratic literacy.

nature of arts funding that applies to all public goods justifications, perfectionist or otherwise.²⁶ Quong first argues that taxation for the provision of a perfectionist public good—a non-excludable good valued for intrinsic reasons—may not be paternalistic, even, if “everyone would like it”.²⁷

It is not irrational or in any other way a mistake to free-ride on the provision of public goods when you lack assurance that others will do their share to contribute to the provision of the goods. (Quong 2011, p. 89)

Quong is conceding that the existence of a free-rider problem could dissolve the worries of paternalism he attaches to perfectionist policies, because when governments act to mitigate free-riding, they acknowledge the rationality of citizens in free-riding on other people’s contributions. But he argues that public-goods-styled defences for “subsidies usually called for by perfectionists [e.g. arts funding]” don’t work, because they “almost never involve genuine public goods”. This is because the goods they promote

can be (and often are) offered in ways that require payment at the point of consumption, which means they lack the essential feature of non-excludability. Individuals can be required to pay to join libraries, enter art galleries... or go to the opera. (Quong 2011, p. 89)

In other words, most of the activities that public arts funding supports are in an important sense *privately beneficial*, in a way that things like national defence and clean air are not. The goods that arts funding provides are too exclusive to qualify as non-excludable.²⁸

Quong’s reasoning is unpersuasive, in part because it relies on an over-simplified understanding of the kind of goods generated in the cultural sphere, and the relation between individual activity and enjoyment, and collective benefit. Of course it is correct, on one level, that someone who pays to attend an art exhibition receives a good from this (enjoyment of the exhibition) that is exclusionary, in a way that disqualifies it from being a non-excludable good. But it is implausible to think of all the possible benefits achieved by an exhibition simply as the sum of the

²⁶ Quong argues that Perfectionists can’t avoid the charge of paternalism, because the most plausible rationales for perfectionist policies like arts funding either don’t work, or make negative judgements about the capacities of citizens to govern their lives (2011, pp. 73–107). Quong directs this argument at Liberal Perfectionists who hold that “regardless of how theories of justice are constructed, there remain perfectionist reasons which ought to inform” government activity (p. 85). While he considers neutral rationales for policies associated with perfectionism beyond his scope (p. 86), his argument motivates an underappreciated objection to Dworkin’s (1985) ‘mixed’ public goods argument for arts funding, and a neutral public goods strategy more generally.

²⁷ Quong discusses an interesting example of fireworks in the night sky as a genuine public good, and a case connected with urban geography/vibrant town centres, but I am focused on his comments on arts funding.

²⁸ Tahzib (2022, p. 279) explains Quong’s point another way: even if art galleries can be made free at the point of consumption, this is not obviously linked with their goals. While I’ve already indicated a possible counterargument to this claim ([Section 3.2](#)), the nature of the good I’m going to describe is broader than the direct point of consumption, because it manifests in the public square.

individualized benefits enjoyed by its attendees. Exhibitions help to comprise an artistic culture, and from that, a culture *per se*.

The mechanism in effect here isn't just found in the cultural sphere. Policies securing the provision of publicly valuable, non-excludable goods often have a contributory structure, in which the specific activities that are being funded for the sake of a good indirectly contribute to it, rather than directly instantiating it.²⁹ For example, the good of having cleaner air is promotable through activities which involve individuals paying for personal benefits. Consider public transport. Cars are a major contributor to urban air pollution. One way to reduce pollution involves subsidizing public transport to make it a more attractive option for commuters who would otherwise drive. Inevitably, the benefits of a better public transport system redound to specific individuals, e.g. people who live near train stations, more than others. However, this fact doesn't nullify the public value and non-exclusiveness of having cleaner air, which is brought about via a policy that results in certain people's individualized enjoyment of convenient transport.³⁰ In short, activities whose proximate benefits are private, in some salient respect, may still ultimately contribute towards commonly valuable, non-excludable goods.

4.2 Brighouse's Manifestness Objection

Suppose that public arts funding contributes to a publicly valuable, non-excludable good. Brighouse argues that even if this is so, it is still presumptively unjust because it creates suspicions of state favouritism or partiality. For the sake of argument, I will grant Brighouse's claim that public arts funding creates suspicions of partiality, even if it has an appropriately neutral aim.³¹ My criticism focuses on his argument's other key premise, namely

MANIFEST NEUTRALITY: It must be manifest to reasonable citizens [i.e., beyond reasonable doubt] that the justifications of discretionary state policies... are neutrally justified.³² (Brighouse 1995, p. 43)

Manifest Neutrality combines Neutrality of Aim with the following constraint.

²⁹ Kramer (2015) makes a similar point in connection to some perfectionist public goods.

³⁰ The provision of non-excludable goods in other domains also requires private employment, e.g. military employees, employees in lighthouses, and clubs or club-like groups, e.g. fire stations, military units.

³¹ In conceding this part of Brighouse's argument, I am not suggesting that impressions of partiality are unimportant or that risks of favouritism should not be mitigated. While I am setting issues of implementation and fairness to the side, I take it that arts funding decisions can be made in ways that are more or less fair and intelligible. Methods such as voting and lotteries can be used, and decisions can be informed by both public opinion and stakeholders in the arts.

³² Brighouse does not provide a name for this principle; hence Manifest Neutrality is a term I am introducing.

PUBLICITY: The actual reasons for government action must be understandable to, and available for scrutiny by, reasonable citizens, and... it must be manifest that the requirements of justice are met. (Brighouse 1995, p. 41)

It is easy to grasp the requirements stated in the first clause. People must be able to understand and scrutinize the reasons behind government action. Insight into these reasons cannot be the exclusive preserve of technocrats, politicians, and business elites. The second clause's requirements are harder to pin down. Brighouse distinguishes two readings of it. On a weaker reading, it only needs to be "*possible*, on the available evidence, for reasonable people to believe that the requirements of justice are fulfilled" (Brighouse 1995, p. 42, my emphasis). But Brighouse regards this as under-demanding, and opts for a stronger reading, on which manifestness requires not just that it is *possible* for people to accept the neutral rationale of some policy, but that most citizens can be *expected* to accept it. He says "there should be little room for reasonable suspicion that the reasons advanced in public for an action are not the real reasons for the action" (p. 42).

It is unclear, however, what justifies Brighouse's claim that, for discretionary state policies, state actions cannot leave room for doubt that the conditions of neutrality are met. Notice how demanding this is. It is not enough for the liberal state to make the neutral aims of its actions and policies easy to see and understand. It must, in addition, make the neutrality of its aims readily recognizable in the specific, chosen means that it adopts in the pursuit of its aims.³³ Why should this be accepted as a strict requirement? Brighouse's defence of Publicity suggests a deeper motivation behind these demands. He says that the appeal of publicity lies in "the desirability of enabling all citizens to engage effectively in political action by making the workings of public politics equally transparent to all parties" (p. 42). In other words, the appeal of manifestness, as an aspect of Publicity, owes to the plausible idea that governments must respect and accommodate people's capacity to participate in political life, e.g. by them joining in policy debates, in a reasonably informed and transparent way.³⁴

The desirability of political engagement, thus construed, is an entirely reasonable commitment, in a liberal theory of justice. And there is a grain of truth in Brighouse's argument. If people suspect they are being given bogus reasons for state action, they may stop paying attention to politics. Conversely, if citizens can understand the reasons for state policies, they are less likely

³³ This emphasis on means indicates another way of spelling out Brighouse's objection, namely: public arts funding is unjust because it adopts a partial *means*, despite its neutral *end* (see Franken 2016). But I think this reading of Brighouse's argument overlooks his appeal to the publicity constraint, and manifestness specifically, whose demands do not reduce to neutrality of means.

³⁴ Brighouse offers another reason for accepting Publicity, namely, that "when we advance policies which will affect the lives of our fellow citizens it is not good enough just to have reasons for policies which our fellow citizens might accept, but it is also incumbent upon us to offer those reasons for assessment and comment" (1995, p. 42). But this is really just a reason to accept the first clause of Publicity (i.e. the understandability/scrutinizability clause), which I'm granting, rather than a reason to accept the manifestness clause, which is what I'm challenging.

to believe political decision-making is a power wielded by a class they don't belong to, or that when governments provide reasons for their actions, they are simply taking the public for a ride.

But Brighthouse exaggerates the demandingness of this ideal in his defence of Publicity. He seems to suggest that a manifest Neutrality of Aim in state action positively enables individuals to participate effectively in politics. He speaks of "the desirability of *enabling* all citizens to engage effectively in political action". This overstates the extent to which suspicions of partiality interfere with participation. People can enter policy debates, form pressure groups, run for office, and engage in activism, even while harbouring suspicions about the hidden, non-neutral aims lurking behind superficially neutral justifications for state action. Indeed, if I suspect that I am being given bogus reasons, this might even inspire my political engagement. So while it is true that being better-equipped to see the reasons behind government actions supports our interest in political engagement, it is not true that political engagement requires this. The manifest fulfilment of Neutrality of Aim therefore isn't, contrary to Brighthouse's suggestion, a transformative precondition for people's political participation.

The more fundamental problem with Brighthouse's appeal to Manifest Neutrality is that this sets a justificatory hurdle for public arts funding that cannot easily be met, but which there is no good justification for applying to public arts funding selectively, and not to other kinds of relatively uncontroversial forms of state action which deliver non-excludable goods. Our reasons for tolerating suspicions of partiality that arise from government spending that contributes to publicly valuable, non-excludable goods, e.g. public roads infrastructure, should also suffice in relation to arts funding, even if we take the latter to be a discretionary policy.

Consider the suspicions of non-neutral aims that we might have in the case of roads. Roads can contribute to a publicly valuable, non-excludable good, through the increased mobility they provide apply to all (or nearly all) residents (Miller 2004, p. 129). There will thus be suitably neutral reasons available to defend such policies, even if they're not always required by justice.

But construction of new roads obviously benefits some citizens more than others, and their construction disrupts the lives of some more than others, e.g. in terms of commuter delays, or increased noise. Moreover, road projects can cause certain neighbourhoods to become less aesthetically pleasing, and in some cases, they may necessitate the compulsory acquisition of property. For all these reasons, it is easy for some citizens to doubt whether 'official' justifications for road projects satisfy Neutrality of Aim. People can say: "What public interest? I'm not interested in using this new road. These projects never run through the neighbourhoods where the politicians and their wealthy friends live. They say it's for everyone's good, but they don't care about our needs around here".

In short, suspicions of partiality often surround such projects in a way that will prevent those projects from satisfying the Publicity constraint that is embedded in Manifest Neutrality. However, we don't ordinarily see roads as belonging to a class of goods governments shouldn't fund, on pain of non-neutrality. Brighouse suggests that there is a principled basis for the double-standard in how our suspicions of partiality affect the legitimacy of state action.

We talk of Christian art, Muslim art, existentialist art, even Communist art... By contrast we do not associate highways... with particular ways of life, because they are, in some important sense, not closely attached to the particularistic interests of those who believe in some and not other ways of life. (Brighouse 1995, pp. 56–57)

We can grant Brighouse's claim that arts funding is particularly susceptible to suspicions of partiality. But why shouldn't the needs fulfilled by roads and similar infrastructure not also be constrained in some way by considerations of manifest impartiality and public trust? To say that roads are in *some important sense*, not *closely* attached to the interests of particular individuals or groups, is just to insert an argumentative placeholder, instead of the principled explanation that we need. People who don't like going to art galleries feel ripped off when the state spends public funds on galleries. People who live in middle-ring suburbs and prefer to ride public transport feel ripped off when the state spends public funds building mega-highways near their homes. If one set of suspicions is problematizing, then the other is too. There are risks of partiality to mitigate in the delivery of public goods, and perceptions of favouritism are not in themselves unimportant. But an acceptable and legitimate way to justify a policy, in the face of such risks/suspicions, is to present a credible account of the non-excludable good it advances, and of how it does so particularly effectively.

So even if we grant that suspicions of partiality can generate potential deficits of legitimacy, discretionary state policies will only be disallowed by these deficits if we have presupposed that these policies cannot effectively contribute to publicly valuable, non-excludable goods. Unless we just presuppose that public arts funding *doesn't* make such a contribution, Brighouse's manifest-ness objection is unconvincing.

5. A Culturally Literate Society

Quong's and Brighouse's objections to the public goods strategy both end up relying on a scepticism—an unwarranted scepticism, I believe—about the possibility of arts funding contributing to a publicly valuable, non-excludable good. In this section I will defend this possibility. Naturally I will not be able to present a completely decisive case for it, given limitations of space. But I will try to say enough about the character of cultural literacy as a publicly valuable, non-excludable good, and how arts funding is a relatively effective means at promoting it, to generate counter-pressure against Quong's and Brighouse's scepticism.

As I suggested earlier, an important feature of many present-day public arts funding schemes in liberal societies is that they aim to diversify the cultural materials that are accessible in the public sphere. The key claims I want to defend in what follows are (1) that such programs can expand society's resources for interpreting culture in ways that appear relatively efficient and effective, relative to other options e.g. in education and tourism ([Sections 5.1–5.2](#)), (2) that such programs can be sincerely defended by appeal to cultural literacy understood as a neutral ideal ([Section 5.3](#)), and (3) that arts funding, alongside other policies, can help create a society with a high degree of cultural literacy, whose core features are non-excludable and publicly valuable ([Section 5.4](#)).

This sort of rationale for arts funding resembles one advanced by Dworkin (1985).³⁵ He argues that a neutral justification for public arts funding is available if we focus on the contributions artistic expression makes to our intellectual environment (Dworkin 1985, p. 225). Specifically, he thinks the arts contribute to the structure of our intellectual environment, by preserving and expanding our stock of shared communicative and interpretative resources.

Dworkin thinks of these resources as being like a shared language, which can become more or less rich, and more or less complex. He argues that we all have an interest in sharing a richer and more complex language, because this is needed to further our basic interest in having “complexity and depth in the forms of life” open to us (p. 229). Individuals can therefore benefit from the rich and complex language that is resourced through the arts, even if they themselves do not engage with the arts. The benefits of arts funding thus disperse across various ways of life, and aren't limited to the private benefits enjoyed by art-consumers. The role of public arts funding, in particular, is to protect and promote the qualities of an artistic culture—including continuity of traditions, and innovations in them—which then add depth and complexity in turn to the shared language that's available to those living in a society.

In this sense, Dworkin's proposal challenges Quong's idea that arts funding rarely, if ever, contributes to a non-excludable good. But even if Quong were to grant that nobody could be excluded from the intellectual environment arts funding contributes to, and that there was a sincerely non-perfectionist way of defending this good, he may doubt the sincerity of defending arts funding as the *only* or *most effective means* of contributing to it. As Carroll argues, even if the arts contribute to our interpretative practices, so do lots of other activities (see also Tahzib 2022, pp. 181–82).

³⁵ Raz also writes: “General beneficial features of a society are inherently public goods. It is a public good, and inherently so, that this society is a tolerant society, that it is an educated society, that it is infused with a sense of respect for human beings” (1986, p. 199). But Raz understands the goodness of these features in perfectionist terms and doesn't explain their relation to specific government policies.

In response, I argue that it is a common feature of public goods policies that they belong to family of practices which each make relatively effective contributions to a non-excludable good. While we may question whether Dworkin's justification can avoid relying on a sectarian statement about the good life, we can't turn this into a more general, robust scepticism about arts funding's relation to any non-excludable good. What we *do* require, in addition to an argument which establishes the neutrality of a wider aim or ideal, is a plausible reason for thinking that arts funding is a member of a family of relatively distinctive/effective practices, for promoting some suitably neutral aim or ideal, in the form of a non-excludable good.

5.1 *Hermeneutical Resources for Cultural Literacy*

Before characterising cultural literacy as a suitably neutral ideal, and the specific relation that the arts have to it, we first need a handle on what I mean by cultural literacy. In developing my account of the non-excludable good served by arts funding, it is useful to borrow Miranda Fricker's (2007) language of *hermeneutical resources*, which she uses in presenting her account of hermeneutical injustice, i.e. suffering caused by an unfair deficit in hermeneutical resources, due to identity-prejudice. Hermeneutical resources are things – including, crucially, for Fricker, the repertoire of concepts available in vernacular language – that help us to interpret the world and our experiences. Someone living with a deficit in hermeneutical resources is (i) less likely to confidently understand their own experiences, beliefs, and lifestyle, (ii) more likely to feel alienated or threatened by the diversity of lifestyles and worldviews they encounter in the world, and (iii) more likely to have their beliefs, actions, and expression misunderstood by others. The rectification of systematic inequalities in hermeneutical resources is an important ethical-political project. But the importance of hermeneutical justice is also indicative of the broader value that there is for all of us, in having a rich and complex stock of hermeneutical resources, for purposes of making sense of ourselves, and others, and the various group identities with which we associate.

One key premise of my account, similar to Dworkin, is that artistic expressions contribute to a society's hermeneutical resources. By supporting the arts sector, the state makes a distinctive contribution to the overall project of maintaining and distributing these resources. There are of course many ways in which arts might contribute to our capacity to interpret and make sense of the world, and hence, plural ways to spell out the role arts can play in contributing to our shared hermeneutical resources. The specific role that I am focused on, though, concerns the power of art to help us to make sense of life lived among people who are different to us.

Art can give us powerful reference-points for interpreting the cultural world, i.e. the overlapping histories, worldviews, lifestyles, customs, and traditions that we find among different groups of people living in contemporary liberal societies. Two features of the arts make them particularly

helpful for interpreting the cultural world. The first is the symbolic character of (much) artistic expression. Raz alludes to the significance of this in his writing on free speech.

Much public expression, in books, newspapers, television, cinema, etc., portrays and expresses aspects of styles or forms of life. Views and opinions, activities, emotions, etc., expressed or portrayed, are an aspect of a wider net of opinions, sensibilities, habits of action or dressing, attitudes, etc., which, taken together, form a distinctive style or form of life. (Raz 1995, p. 153)

These remarks do not apply solely to art, but many artistic expressions epitomize what Raz is characterizing. The second feature is one that is emphasized in a range of contemporary work on the value of the arts (e.g. Nussbaum 1997, Kieran 2004, Gaut 2007), namely, the power of art to enlist our imaginative and affective faculties, in understanding others. By inviting us to reflect on what it would be like to walk in other people's shoes, artistic works can help attune us to experiences that may be unfamiliar, through forms of reflection we may not otherwise have engaged in (or not in such an affecting way). By vividly depicting other types of experiences and ways of life, artistic expression helps to make these experiences and ways of life more familiar and legible to us. Countless examples could be given. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* helps readers, especially white readers, get some feeling of what it might have been like to be a black American man during the Jim Crow era (Nussbaum 1997, pp. 85–113, Mills 2007). Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs offer audiences, especially straight audiences, some feeling for the erotic lives of gay men during the AIDS epidemic. These kinds of lives become easier to imagine, through their symbolic depiction, so that they stop seeming (to certain audiences) like such alien deviations from the norm.

Of course not all artworks have the empathic or affective powers we appreciate in Ellison's or Mapplethorpe's works. But I take these works to provide helpful indications of the ways that art can expand our sense of the imaginable and familiar. This can take place in less representational ways, too, when exposure to relatively abstract musical or visual culture brings us in contact with aspects of the cultural world in an affecting way. Instrumental music and abstract visual art may not aim to portray/represent experiences and ways of life. But all artistic expression emerges from human beings at a certain time and place. In this sense, nonrepresentational art can still reflect salient features of different social histories, and the regions and traditions its makers and appreciators belong to or connect with. To draw an example: Subgenres of electronic music (e.g. house, dubstep) may reflect cultural developments in the 1980s and 90s, and aspects of the African diaspora: facts which public radio and galleries can help communicate, through contextualising works. Nonfigurative visual media can also bear an important relation to the cultures, histories and experiences of citizens (Hebdige 2002). Textile patterns and graphic design elements can also reflect certain regions and cultural histories, as can relatively abstract painting methods e.g. Indigenous Australian art.

5.2 Arts Funding as a Suitably Neutral Means of Cultural Literacy

But these observations, even if well placed, can only establish that artistic activities are among a family of practices which help cultivate cultural literacy. Perhaps the goods of cultural literacy can be satisfactorily promoted *without* arts funding. After all, opportunities for travel and interaction with foreign cultures can conduce to cultural literacy. Cultural literacy can also be efficiently promoted via educational policies, like language education, or things like anti-racist pedagogy. In fact, educational policies may be much more effective at transmitting cultural literacy, compared with arts funding, in some respects: most citizens can pass through them, whereas not everybody will visit art galleries, the theatre, and read novels. Furthermore, certain kinds of income redistribution policies may also help to address deficits in cultural literacy, e.g. when impoverishment interferes with attaining basic levels of education and cultural awareness.

I am not in any way resisting these insights. I am just claiming that among these available means, arts funding is an *efficient* and *effective* way of promoting an important dimension of cultural literacy. This is partly because it is a more cost-effective way, than these alternatives, of marshalling our affective capacities in the service of cultural literacy. Not all of us want to, or can, travel widely. And due to facts of geography, culture and lifestyle, we may lack exposure to citizens and ways of life present in our political community. Inversely, our fellow citizens can lack familiarity with *us*.

Moreover, the arts are often connected with some of the most affecting features of school curricula. While cultural literacy can be promoted through a national curriculum, some of the most affectively and imaginatively engaging aspects of that curriculum, to this end, seem likely to be found in the arts and humanities, whose contents (in terms of novels, visual artworks, music, dance) are nurtured over time through arts funding. The distinctive aspects of artworks, here, is not simply that they communicate about culture, history and experience. History, philosophy, sociology and legal studies can do that, too, and in a very stimulating way. It's that the arts appear to engage with our imagination and affect more directly and consistently than other areas of education (Kieran 2004, Gaut 2007). Indeed, they are characteristically celebrated for this reason.

Why should this matter? Well, people are more likely to attain cultural literacy if they feel some attraction or compulsion towards understanding other cultures. If understanding other cultures is just a kind of civic chore, people will naturally be averse to pursuing it. Arts access can turn the process of understanding other cultures into a moving, recreational—potentially thrilling—adventure.

Given the scope of the current project, I can't offer a comprehensive, case-by-case comparative analysis, of the relative efficacy with which arts funding promotes cultural literacy, compared to

all the other conceivable policy options—based on education, language acquisition, travel, wealth retribution, etc. All I mean to claim here, is that among the set of available means, arts engagement offers an attractive combination of *distinctiveness* (in respect of how it engages people’s affective and imaginative capacities) and *affordability* (in respect of how benefits can be delivered *en masse*), in promoting cultural literacy. This is the kind of contribution that seems to grant a certain policy, P, membership in a family of relatively distinctive and effective practices, by virtue of belonging to which, P earns a neutral rationale in service of a publicly valuable, non-excludable good.

5.3 *Cultural literacy as a Suitably Neutral Aim/Political Ideal*

A natural question to ask about my proposal is: How does the ideal of cultural literacy sit within political liberalism? Is it right to say that cultural literacy, as I’m describing it, avoids commitments to any controversial ethical, aesthetic or epistemic doctrine? To answer this: an ideal of cultural literacy can be understood in a thicker or thinner fashion. A thicker understanding might emphasise cultural literacy’s value outside the domain of citizenship or say that cultural literacy is a value in itself, that isn’t to be explained by recourse to equality or freedom. But given the anti-Perfectionistic aspirations of the account I’m developing, I mean to be invoking a thinner conception, on which cultural literacy’s value is limited to its role in furthering our interests and capacities as citizens. My claims about cultural literacy’s value don’t assume any thesis about “the ultimate nature of human good” (Larmore 1996, p. 122). Rather, in a way that resembles Nussbaum’s view on the value of civic education, I am suggesting that our interests in cultural literacy derive from our interests in fulfilling our civic responsibilities and living in a society in which other people are aiming to fulfil theirs, too.

Seeing as modern liberal democracies are (often) multicultural, cultural literacy helps us to grasp the nature of the political world, and in doing so, helps us to lead effective and responsive lives as modern citizens. It can support us to gain a deeper understanding of social differences that politics implicates – of gender, sexuality, religion, migration and asylum-seeking, and so on. Understood in this purely political way, cultural literacy is an ideal that also assists us in recognising one another as equals, by helping us to understand each other’s interests and to take them seriously.

Because the value of cultural literacy, as I’m understanding it, derives from these kinds of applications, its application is aimed at advancing our interests as citizens. Cultural literacy’s value, thus construed, can justify arts funding without presupposing a doctrine like Aesthetic Cognitivism, i.e. the view that aesthetic value is primarily a matter of imparting understanding, or knowledge. In short, I’m not equating art’s aesthetic value with its power to impart cultural understanding, or denying the value of forms of art that lack a salient relation to cultural literacy

as I'm understanding it. All I'm claiming is that art helps to cultivate cultural literacy in certain respects that help citizens to fulfil their civic duties, or simply to understand the nature of the political community they live in.

5.4 A Publicly Valuable, Non-excludable Good

Obviously someone could question this view about the special utility of the arts in providing these kinds of hermeneutical resources. But for present purposes, the more pressing objection is one that still applies even if one accepts this view, in principle. The worry is: how can public arts funding impart these resources to people who don't want to engage with the arts? And doesn't that lack of desire reveal that such people get no real benefit from these resources?

I don't think that these are the sort of questions that political liberals tend to raise about other public goods policies. But engaging with this sort of suspicion helps to clarify and defend my view. To this end, it is useful to distinguish between two groups who do not engage with the activities that public arts funding typically sponsors. The first group, who I will call *Outsiders*, are people who don't engage with the arts, but whose cultures are likely to receive greater public representation due to diversity-oriented arts funding. The second group, who I will call *Insiders*, are people who don't engage with the arts, and whose cultures receive no additional representation as a result of diversity-oriented arts funding.

It is relatively easy to tell a story about how *Outsiders* benefit, at least indirectly, from the cultural literacy that is nurtured through diversity-oriented arts funding. Works that reflect aspects of our experiences provide our peers with hermeneutical resources that help them recognise what is significant about them. When sexual harassment is more widely acknowledged in public discourse, women are likely to receive more support in discussing their experiences of sexual harassment. Audiences are better equipped to take their accounts at face value, even if they have not experienced anything like it. Novels and films can do a great deal to nurture these sensibilities across a society.

This point also applies to experiences more closely linked to cultural heritage and religion. The value of cultural expressions, religious beliefs, and traditions do not derive from their common legibility.³⁶ Still, more accurate, mainstream representation of *Outsider* cultural practices eases the pressure on people in those cultures to distance themselves from their practices. For example, Muslims living in a Christian society can feel this sort of pressure, as can Christians living in a predominantly Muslim society. But different religious and cultural expressions are less likely to

³⁶ As Medina (2013, p. 90) says, "we should be careful not to tie too closely people's hermeneutical capacities to the repertoire of readily available terms and coined concepts". Groups and individuals have ways of expressing and understanding their experiences before they become widely legible.

be met with uncomprehending responses when the general public has some familiarity with them. This sort of basic recognition can help Outsiders to feel more assured of their heritage and social standing.³⁷

But what about Insiders? The worldviews and lifestyles common to the cultural mainstream are already better expressed and portrayed in public culture, in relative terms, and hence they aren't prioritized in public programs aimed at cultivating cross-cultural literacy. The social benefits of cultural literacy, brought about via diversity-based arts funding, will therefore not redound to Insiders, in the way they redound to Outsiders. Given that Insiders are also, by definition, not art-lovers/consumers, it is not clear why living in a culturally literate society benefits them or advances some interest that they have.

But I think there is a benefit, in how the hermeneutic resources available in a culturally literate society leave Insiders more likely to find their neighbours' worldviews and lifestyles intelligible. This in turn makes Insiders less likely to be seriously confused or alienated, due to their inability to make sense of the society they live in and their own position in it. Here is an example to illustrate.

SALLY: Sally lives happily immersed in a religious community. Her community provides her with such meaning that she feels little need to challenge or step outside it. Most of Sally's time is spent interacting with people who share her religious beliefs, and her experiences and goals are largely formed in connection to these beliefs. Among the beliefs nurtured by her community are those related to marriage and sexuality, e.g. that marriage is a sacred union between a man and a woman, that heterosexuality is natural, and that homosexuality is a disorder. Her environment nurtures these beliefs in myriad ways. The social media and online media that she consumes don't portray gay relationships as normal or legitimate. Her community only celebrates heterosexual marriages, and to her knowledge she has never interacted with a gay person.

Consider how Sally is placed to interpret gay culture with such minimal exposure to it, in a region in which arts funding is very limited or doesn't even exist. Perhaps she wanders into a new store on her strip of shops, only to find gay, queer, trans and nonbinary people in conversation about a new book. This is not Sally's corner of the world, and she doesn't need to feel at home. However, the mere existence of the store grates with her belief that homosexuality is rare and aberrant. She feels baffled that people would want to work and meet there and can't understand the way they dress and express their sexuality.

³⁷ Many liberals have discussed the importance of creating a public culture that provides members of minority cultures with the kind of recognition I am describing here (e.g. Kymlicka 1989, 1995, Taylor 1992, Gutmann 2003). My contribution to these discussions, in this Chapter, is just to say that arts funding is a distinctively effective means of fostering this sort of recognition. In Chapters 3–4, I develop a wider thesis about the relationship between cultural representation, agency, and respect.

Arts funding helps alleviate the confusion and alienation Sally is predisposed to feel in this kind of setting. As the aesthetic features of public spaces and infrastructure become more diverse for those who consume arts, they also become more diverse for Sally. I am here referring to shopfront displays, street advertising, and the kinds of things Carroll (1987) refers to as legitimate objects of arts funding, like the designs of stamps, public buildings and monuments. Because our beliefs, biases and cultural shock are shaped by what we are exposed to, these adjustments affect how we interpret and respond to social difference.

Suppose Sally's local government provides a series of grants in support of gay artists and culture. One scheme supports local shops by underwriting the expenses of marginalised literature. Another scheme commissions artists to develop works exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ people, to be exhibited in public buildings. Even though she doesn't visit galleries or museums, over time, Sally passively encounters queer literature advertised in shopfronts and sees commissioned photographs in buildings. These provide reference-points and points of exposure to experiences and cultures she feels distant from.

On top of this, arts funding, alongside other cultural literacy efforts, nurtures cultural-literacy-enhancing communicative practices in Sally's community. As her neighbours begin to find gay people more intelligible because of the kinds of films, books, exhibitions, and theatre that public arts funding distributes, this takes expression in the kinds of behaviour and conversation around her. She finds that others are less confused by gay culture and homosexuality than she expected. When she asks others, "What's with that weird shop down the road?", she's less likely to hear perspectives that echo and reinforce her view that being gay is rare and aberrant.³⁸

There are of course difficulties in determining how much Sally might gain from *specific* investments in the arts. But the extent that specific investments in national defence infrastructure deter invasion, and when they do so, is also difficult to determine. The way to conceive of the day-to-day contributions that arts funding makes to Insiders, is as part of a coordinated, ongoing investment in the socio-cultural infrastructure that enables universal cultural literacy. How much arts funding accounts for the benefits of a culturally literate society depends on factors like how much of it there is, how long it has been around for and how many people engage with the arts. The point is that Insiders, along with Outsiders and arts-lovers, benefit from living in a society with the characteristics that diversity-based arts funding programs generate and maintain.

³⁸ Of course, a changing social environment can itself be unsettling. The point is that arts funding provides more support to grasp realities of the world Sally lives in.

5.5 Objections

Perhaps some liberals will dislike the way I've framed this conversation. They might think that a proper response to the objection will show that there is a *right* to arts funding or cultural literacy, rather than a mere interest in it (cf. Raz 1986, pp. 202–03). But it overstates the objection to suggest that arts funding is (unacceptably) non-neutral simply because cross-cultural literacy is something people can live without. The Neutrality Objection need not travel hand in hand with such a thin account of the state, in which *inessential* government activity is unjustified.

However, it is notable that our interests in cultural literacy could be pitched at a more fundamental level than I've implied. We could say, for example, that we cannot fulfil our basic democratic duties, or should not be competitive for positions of public office, if we are profoundly culturally illiterate. An irony of my account, then, is that the more fundamentally these interests are pitched, the less discretionary cultural literacy policies, or efforts which conduce to cultural literacy indirectly, appear to be. However, I take this not to show that cultural literacy policies can't be justified on a public goods basis, but rather that they may *also* be able to be justified, within a certain range, by appeal to something like the right to political participation, the right to educational resources, or some understanding of fair equality of opportunity. It is not inconsistent with my argument that there may also be (suitably neutral) justice-based reasons for cultural literacy-based policies, so long as they haven't been presupposed. All this would suggest is that cultural literacy policies are neutrally justifiable in a variety of ways. And I take it that this is, after all, how we tend to understand the characteristics of many 'essential' non-excludable goods, such as those related to national defence: within some limits, their protection is required by justice. Beyond that range, we may still have interests in them, but spending is discretionary and ought to be subject to democratic decisions.

A second objection might be that cultural literacy-style justifications for arts funding fail to accommodate a diversity of aesthetic values. Perhaps we think that some of what is (or ought to be) funded under the banner of arts funding today—e.g. acquisitions and exhibitions of expensive Renaissance paintings—is not best defended by appeal to cultural literacy, but rather by appeal to some conception of intrinsic value (Barry 2002, p. 198, Tahzib 2022, pp. 189–94).

In response, the first thing to stress is that there plausibly are values of cultural literacy that Donatello and Michelangelo's works promote, and it is not clear how highlighting these cultural-literacy related benefits conflicts with ascribing intrinsic value to such works as well. If the public are relatively unfamiliar with the cultural history of the Renaissance, and this is a heritage that some modern citizens connect with, then cultural literacy provides *one* basis for funding Renaissance acquisitions.

But because I'm interested in the role that cultural literacy can play in our lives as citizens, my justification will not lend itself well to art that doesn't connect in some distinctive way with aspects of modern life. This means that some works are *prima facie* less likely to receive government funding on the basis of cultural literacy. While arts lovers may take this as a defective feature of my account, a sincere public goods rationale does not place their interests at its core.

To consider one example of exclusion: Cubist art, though it reflects and expresses certain aspects of early twentieth century Parisian culture, and in that way may help us to interpret related areas of cultural history, would not seem to qualify for support on *that* basis, just because the link between early twentieth century Parisian culture and democratic life in modern, multicultural democracies is tenuous (at least, this seems true once we're outside French borders). Political liberals who only endorse narrow neutrality (e.g. Rawls, Barry), and are thus open to including some perfectionist reasoning in non-justice-based, democratically-endorsed policies, could accommodate a thicker notion of cultural literacy than the one I've articulated, and which mightn't discredit cubist art in the same way.

While cultural literacy will leave some areas of the arts without good standing for public support, some of this art may already enjoy market viability: there are, for instance, private collections of cubist art in many major Western cities. But there will be art, inevitably, which falls through the cracks of market viability and cultural literacy policies.³⁹ However, the neutral rationale outlined here still appears to accommodate a large portion of current spending on the arts in liberal democracies, and much more than Carroll, Brighouse and Quong have implied was possible.

If the objection is rather that cultural literacy isn't the most persuasive rationale for all spending on the arts today, this is true. My account entails that if works are already recognisable to a broad public, the case for their public support is lessened. This provides a market-sensitive, democratically informed heuristic for decision-making around the goals that publicly funded arts institutions might embrace. However, I don't think this rationale is always manifest in funding decisions. I'm not claiming that all current spending on the arts is accommodated by appeal to cultural literacy: I'm saying that it provides a good rationale for *diversity-oriented* spending. Even for the areas of spending it does have explanatory purchase over, though, notions of artistic merit are also doing work. But notions of merit are at work in the provision of essential non-excludable goods too. When we decide to improve national defence or public health, we deploy various notions of merit to this end (Brighouse 1995, p. 56). In the case of arts funding, evaluative standards can be deployed in a comparable manner, to help fill gaps in public resources for

³⁹ Of course, the presence of other justifying aims might expand the criteria of arts funding beyond what I'm describing, but my focus is on developing a cultural literacy account.

cultural literacy, on the basis of how we might expect certain artistic projects to help promote cultural literacy in some way or another.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, we may have to accept that in cases where a neutral aim like cultural literacy cannot do equal work with notions of merit, the Neutrality Objection regains force and a neutral justification for funding recedes, particularly for political liberals committed to broad neutrality like Quong (and seemingly Brighouse 1995). But while the neutral reasons I have articulated cannot apply to all variations and moment-to-moment decisions of public arts funding, they offer a rationale for the increasingly diversity-oriented public arts funding policies that have emerged in liberal democracies over the last three decades, and present a method for communicating the value of arts funding to a broad public.

6. Conclusion

In order to overcome the Neutrality Objection, it need not be shown that every person has a direct interest in arts funding. It can just be shown that arts funding contributes to a wider good that we have a shared interest in as citizens. Explaining how arts funding makes a distinctive contribution to a publicly valuable, non-excludable good is a promising strategy here, because it shows that it supports a good that can benefit everyone as citizens, irrespective of whether they enjoy art.

I have argued that diversity-based arts funding advances our common interests in cultural literacy. In this sense, its most desirable effects are non-excludable, because the hallmark of a culturally literate society is a public setting and communicative culture that supports a more accurate interpretation of the society we live in. As arts funding improves these public resources for one of us, it does for all.

The force of Brighouse's objection was that arts funding, as a discretionary policy, is particularly liable to suspicions of partiality, and this undermines its public value ([Section 4.2](#)). But by placing arts funding in the company of other policies which make distinctive contributions to valuable,

⁴⁰ We might ask how one could be assured that my proposal won't lead to worse art. My account would be seriously unconvincing if the arts programs it promoted appeared to those who engaged with them in good faith as superficial, dull, pedantic, or insincere. But I take it that the evaluative resources we gain by contemplating whether artworks/programs have (a) a salient relation to living citizens, and (b) imaginative and affective properties, makes this result seem unlikely. If I'm right to say that artistic expressions make relatively effective/distinctive contributions to our hermeneutical resources, it would be surprising if these qualities were uncorrelated with judgements of artistic merit. Shakespeare's works would be less good at encouraging us to reflect on the human condition were he a dull writer. Picasso's *Guernica* is not merely expressing the horrors of war. Its arrangement is emotionally arresting and provocative, and critics often use these sorts of descriptions when they describe it as a valuable piece of art. So while I hear the force of the worry, I think that the method of evaluating what counts as a relatively effective contribution to a public good provides us with a conception of merit (including a, b) that means this result is avoided.

non-excludable goods, my argument disarms this objection. Perhaps we are able to live minimally decent lives without cultural literacy, whereas we can't do so without breathable air. But the fact that arts funding makes a genuine contribution to cultural literacy, and in ways that can ultimately benefit all of us, means that it strikes a satisfactory balance between expected benefits and deficits to trust arising when people doubt its impartiality.

By articulating the nature of this contribution, and how it reaches all corners of the public ([Section 5](#)), I have also neutralised Quong's excludability objection. Quong is right that not everybody directly consumes the goods that arts funding promotes ([Section 4.1](#)). But by helping to diversify our shared stock of hermeneutic resources, artistic activities make a distinctive and valuable contribution to the culturally literate society, which is something all citizens have an interest in.

2. Openness, Priority, and Free Museums

I have now argued that diversity-based arts funding is publicly justifiable based on interests that citizens share in cultural literacy. Given that a range of cultural and educational institutions in liberal states also aim to promote a diversity of materials, cultural literacy also provides a rationale for forms of cultural funding beyond the arts. However, considerations of fairness arise with respect to *how* these policies are implemented. This chapter takes up one such consideration: distributive fairness. Although Chapter 1 considered cultural literacy as a collective good, it did not explore how the trait of cultural literacy, and the resources that support it, should be distributed between groups and regions. This chapter explores these questions through a close examination of the UK's policy of promoting free admissions to major museums. I defend a prioritarian principle of distributive justice, and argue that free admissions can be a surprisingly bad way of promoting cultural opportunities for disadvantaged groups.

1. Introduction

Museums are currently facing a range of ethical criticisms, relating to cultural repatriation, the ethics of display, and ongoing colonial dynamics.⁴¹ In this chapter I examine an important question that has largely been neglected in philosophical debates about museums, namely, whether making museums free to all visitors is a good way to improve their accessibility.⁴² This translates into a specific public policy question: is a general policy of free admissions worth prioritising in museums funding, in a place like England?⁴³

Free admissions are only one of a broad suite of measures aimed at making museums more inclusive and democratic. Other measures include outreach and engagement practices granting influence over what museums do, diverse curating and programming, investments that expand

⁴¹ Some museums were established in the mid-18th century, and their collections and exhibits reflect this colonial-era history. But major museums opened in the 21st century, like the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, also face criticisms of applying a Eurocentric perspective to non-Western cultures. For related debates, see Appiah (2010), Easton and Gaskell (2009), Lindsay (2012), Matthes (2017), Thompson (2003, 2013). For discussion of museums funding specifically, see Stanton-Ife (2017).

⁴² A recent exception is Wolff and de-Shalit (2023), who argue that museums should be free or low cost on grounds of relational equality. Lindsay (2012) also argues that cultural antiquities have a kind of public existence that demands that nobody is excluded from accessing them. His account would seem to entail that access to museums of cultural antiquities must be free, although he doesn't make that conclusion explicit. Free admissions have been debated by social scientists, e.g. Martin (2002), Cowell (2007), Rushton (2017)

⁴³ Free admissions can also be explored from the perspective of pricing strategies at specific museums (for recent research in the UK, see DC Research and Durnin Research 2023).

the geographic reach of a museum's collections (e.g. touring of works), and funding for museums (old and new) in less developed areas (Dodd and Sandell 1998, p. 14, Simon 2010).

Suppose we think that museums *should* promote cultural accessibility. There is something intuitive in the idea that free admissions, along with all these other measures, would help with this. They remove barriers of access for less well-off groups, boost attendance, and can symbolise a commitment to cultural accessibility.

But whether we think a nation-wide policy of free admissions will effectively advance cultural accessibility depends on how we understand that idea. We might think that cultural accessibility is all about increasing opportunities to engage with cultural goods. Perhaps we would all benefit from living in a society where citizens attend museums in large numbers. Insofar as free admissions promote attendance, they might promote a more “cultured society” (Raz 1986, Réaume 1998), even if museums cluster in wealthier areas, and mainly attract advantaged groups.⁴⁴

On the other hand, we might think of cultural accessibility as something that involves a more concerted commitment to fairness. Perhaps we don't simply want to promote cultural opportunities, but want to improve cultural access for less advantaged citizens in particular. The worry with free museums—free admissions to major museums,⁴⁵ in particular—is that although they are often motivated by these fairness-related concerns, they don't appear to effectively promote cultural accessibility for marginalised and disadvantaged groups. In fact, depending on what other access-promoting measures are adopted already, they may even *impede* it.

The UK provides an ideal case study for exploring this because (i) the UK's museum system is a prominent and influential one, (ii) it has a general policy of free admissions, and (iii) that policy has been explained and defended on the basis of increasing cultural accessibility for all, including disadvantaged groups. As former UK culture secretary Jeremy Hunt once put it, the UK's “free museums and galleries ensure that culture is for everyone, not just the lucky few” (Hunt and DCMS 2011). The scheme has two prongs: (a) allocation of tax breaks to museums that offer free admissions, and (b) grant-in-aid to select “national” institutions.⁴⁶ While all museums are

⁴⁴ Réaume describes “a cultured society” as a kind of public good which “requires the existence of a certain “critical mass” of individuals who create and enjoy rock videos, read and write literature, compose, perform, and listen to music, paint and sculpt, and so forth” (1998, p. 5). This expression comes from Raz (1986, pp. 199–203).

⁴⁵ I am using this term to refer to museums which can expect to attract relatively huge numbers even while charging, e.g. over a million visits a year.

⁴⁶ (a) The relevant section of UK tax law is Section 33A of the VAT Act 1994. Previously (i.e. before 2001), this code facilitated breaks only for museums that charged admissions. (b) Grants-in-aid vary on a year-to-year basis and serve purposes beyond free admission (see the [Appendix](#) for spending 2017–22). The current policy began in 2001, when culture secretary Chris Smith coordinated an arrangement between the Treasury and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) that encouraged specific museums to adopt free admissions. Since their founding the British Museum (est. 1753), National Gallery (est. 1824), V&A (est. 1852), and Tate (est. 1897) have at various times provided free admissions. The 2001 policy expanded and cemented this tradition (Cowell 2007). Ticketing occurs at national museums for special exhibitions.

eligible for these tax breaks, grants-in-aid target 15 prominent “national” institutions including the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Natural History Museum, the V&A, and the Tate Galleries.⁴⁷ Grants operate at an average of over £450 m annually in recent years (DC Research and Wavehill 2024, p. 19).⁴⁸ The tax breaks were estimated to be about £40 m per year in 2007 (£60 m while adjusting for inflation) (Cowell 2007, p. 206).⁴⁹ As I will emphasise, the scheme upholds an arrangement by which Londoners have received over four times more national funding to their local institutions (2017–22), relative to other English residents (see the [Appendix](#)).

My criticism has two parts. First, given a finite pool of funding, England’s policy of free admissions pulls resources away from measures that are more effective in improving accessibility for less advantaged groups. Research suggests that free admission is not crucial to diversifying audiences or imparting benefits to less well-off groups (DC Research 2016, p. 15, DC Research and Durnin Research 2023, p. 28, Swedish Agency for Cultural Analysis 2023, pp. 24–26, Martin 2002, Cowell 2007).⁵⁰ After all, museums can be free but not engage in targeted outreach and programming activities, and cluster in areas whose residents are wealthier and more educated.

Second, free museums may not be just an ineffective but a *damaging* means of improving cultural accessibility for less advantaged citizens. This is because (a) the benefits of museums attendance have *competitive aspects* (e.g. informal education, cultural capital), and (b) museums are mainly visited by upper-income groups. By removing barriers of access to museums in wealthier areas, free admissions can confer positional advantages on people who live closer to them, making those further away (especially disadvantaged groups) worse off than they would have been if museums were ticketed. At the same time, such museums can *seem* more accessible and attract praise that helps to stabilise existing arrangements.

⁴⁷ The institutions currently supported by both prongs (‘national museums’) are cited in the [Appendix](#). Despite being a ‘UK policy’, they are all based in England. There are complications to reading into this – English taxpayers may be contributing to other forms of funding in Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland beyond the DCMS. For that reason, I limit discussion to regional spending differences within England.

⁴⁸ Not all of this figure is due to museums being free.

⁴⁹ This figure is likely to have increased because the first prong of the scheme now applies to all museums willing to ‘go free’.

⁵⁰ It is a repeated finding that higher socio-economic groups are overrepresented at museums overall, and that lower socio-economic groups are underrepresented. This appears stable across most free and pay-to-enter museums. My claims are based on England. Looking at Europe, sociologists have hypothesised that as national income inequality goes down, museum attendance goes up (Szlendak and Karwacki 2012). Analysis from Szlendak and Karwacki on 22 European countries lends support to this idea. At face value, this might suggest that audience diversity is a function of background inequalities. However, Szlendak and Karwacki’s findings do not control for the *demographics* of people attending museums in countries with lower inequality. They just suggest that as income inequality goes down, cultural consumption generally goes up, even if it is centralised in well-educated, wealthier groups (see also Swedish Agency for Cultural Analysis 2023).

These criticisms are contextual and work by degree. They are not weighty in all cases. However, they raise concerns about free admissions to major museums in relatively advantaged areas, such as London, Stockholm, and New York. While *other* (non-fairness-based) reasons might justify making major museums in these areas free, my point is that an explicitly fairness-based justification for making major museums free is often specious.

I start by unpacking what I will now refer to as *Openness*: the idea that we should try and promote cultural accessibility ([Section 2](#)). I enumerate four civic benefits museums can provide, and defend an explicitly fairness-based conception of Openness understood in ‘prioritarian’ terms.⁵¹ I then describe three prominent arguments for free museums in England ([Section 3](#)). I argue that the first argument (based on audience diversity) is empirically dubious. Meanwhile, the latter two (relating to opportunity and audience experience) don’t satisfy a prioritarian conception of Openness unless poor and marginalised groups already have relatively good access to national museums in England, whereas they often don’t. If the motivation for free museums is fairness-based, English cultural policy ought to be rearranged so that it more actively favours less advantaged groups. This creates a qualified case for abolishing free admissions to major museums, to generate and re-allocate funds for other access-promoting measures, such as outreach and targeted programming at major museums, and grants for organisations and projects in less developed areas.

In [Sections 4–6](#) I make these criticisms more precise and explore their upshots. For instance, I seem committed to saying that Thatcher’s 1974 policy of introducing ticketing at major museums actually *helped* poor and disadvantaged people, despite not being coupled with a redistributive agenda for building or relocating national institutions outside of London.⁵² While I accept this implication, I explain why my account would never recommend a policy like Thatcher’s, because it didn’t aim to redistribute any resources. My argument entails not only a *pro tanto* case against universal free admissions, but a case for major cultural investments in less advantaged regions, or “levelling up”. I conclude in [Section 7](#).

My argument is critical of existing policy arrangements in England. However, it should not be misread as a call to decrease museums funding, or as a criticism of the important work that practitioners are doing to broaden access and participation in museums. This chapter aims to

⁵¹ I am understanding “prioritarian” to mean that the interests of less advantaged groups should have greater weight in our deliberations. By less advantaged groups, I mean those who are less well-off in terms of social welfare, rather than those who are less advantaged simply in terms of their access to cultural goods. Prioritarianism as a moral theory is often cashed out in terms of *diminishing marginal returns*. As Larry Temkin writes: “there is a diminishing marginal value of well-being, such that the worse off someone is in absolute terms, the greater importance or value is attached to improving their well-being by a given amount” (Temkin 2003, p. 64).

⁵² In 1974, ticketing for national museums was introduced under culture secretary John Eccles and then-education secretary Thatcher, who defended the policy in Parliament (see Hansard 1973) and recommenced it when the Conservatives returned to power in 1979 (Cowell 2007, pp. 205–06). The aim was to increase funding by gathering extra revenue, to be allocated back to existing arrangements. I am referring to this as “Thatcher’s policy”. As prime minister (1979–90) Thatcher oversaw other initiatives (see note 102) that I’m not referring to.

contribute to ongoing discussions about how to make arts and cultural funding fairer. In doing so, it highlights the importance of thinking about communal infrastructure in a way that pays greater attention to geography-based inequality,⁵³ and raises concerns that may also apply to museums beyond the UK, and to educational institutions as well.

2. Openness

I am using Openness to refer to the view that we should try to promote cultural opportunities. This broad definition allows room to interpret the value of increased cultural accessibility in different ways (i.e. not necessarily with an emphasis on *fairness*).

For present purposes, cultural opportunities are opportunities to engage with *cultural goods*. While there are various ways of understanding cultural goods, this dissertation adopts a sociological view of them, as the objects and practices implicated in the shared beliefs, practices, and values of particular social groups. However, the cultural goods I am concerned with are those facilitated by *museums*. These cultural goods relate to creating and attending exhibitions on topics of public interest. The relevant “social group”, in this setting, becomes “citizens”. This theoretical setup requires us to identify the civic benefits attached to state-funded exhibitions and programmes in museums. First, we need to understand more about museums.

Museums differ substantially and change over time (Brown and Mairesse 2018). They vary, for example, in (a) their physical size and architecture, (b) their funding arrangements and resources, (c) their subject matter, (d) their specialist skills and knowledge, (e) the size and profile of their audiences, (f) the manner and degree to which they aim to engage with the public/expand their audiences, and (g) their geographic, social, economic, and political contexts.⁵⁴

My argument will focus on the 15 “national museums” in England.⁵⁵ To account for some variation among them, I will use the term *major museum* to refer to the largest and most visited among them (e.g. Tate Galleries, Natural History Museum, British Museum, National Gallery, and V&A).⁵⁶ National museums vary, for example, in their size and architecture, themes and contents, and local geographic context. However, they have at least three features in common: (1) their permanent collections are free to all (i.e. tourists, residents), (2) they receive national public funds on an ongoing basis from a UK-wide department, Department for Digital, Culture,

⁵³ Geographers and museums scholars have studied UK spatial inequalities (e.g. Ballatore and Candlin 2023). For normative philosophical work on spatial inequality, see Wolff and de-Shalit, (2023) Young (2002). On the global distribution of cultural goods and artefacts, see Matthes (2017).

⁵⁴ These differences pose challenges to defining “museum”. For discussion in a UK context, see Candlin and Larkin (2020) and Candlin, Larkin, Ballatore, and Poulouvassilis (2022).

⁵⁵ For discussion of British national museums, see Watson and Sawyer (2011). For analysis of national museums across contexts, see Knell, Aronsson, and Amundsen (2010).

⁵⁶ These museums each had over 2.5 m visitors in 2022/3 (DCMS 2022/23, [Table 1](#)).

Media & Sport (DCMS), and (3) they are all in England and (with the exception of National Museums Liverpool) are at least partly located in London, with most mainly situated there (Mendoza 2017). The cultural goods facilitated by these museums include exhibitions and programmes in art museums like the Tate Modern, as well as those with a more sociological focus, like the Museum of the Home, or the British Museum, along with the work of museums focusing on science or natural history, such as the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum.

On the other hand, my argument relies on a theory of the cultural value of museums that is intentionally *broad*er than the national museums in England. This is because one of my core goals is to encourage us to imagine how resources could be allocated to museums in ways that are different to the current arrangements. An important step in this process is highlighting some of the general values that museums can serve despite their differences. This will allow us to then evaluate how fair and effective the current arrangements are in promoting benefits for less well-off groups.

2.1 *Four Benefits*

There is a huge literature on the benefits of museums (Crossick and Kasznka 2016).⁵⁷ My goal here is not to provide a definitive or exhaustive account of these, but just to highlight some of the benefits citizens might recognise as worth promoting, even if they do not tend to visit museums themselves.

Why try and promote access to museums? The simplest reason is that museums provide benefits that all of us as citizens seem to have an interest in receiving. Some of these benefits are (a) *educational* (Hein 1998, Hooper-Greenhill 1999).⁵⁸ When states fund museums, they are also supporting visits (whether from school groups, university students, or other adults) that prompt curiosity, wonder, and conversation on topics that might otherwise have felt abstract, boring, or irrelevant.⁵⁹ The educational qualities of museums can be enumerated with respect to their own specific goals, and can be valued for their own sake, or for their instrumental utility.

⁵⁷ For discussion of the valuable roles that UK museums can serve, see Museums Association (2012, 2013). For discussion of the roles of museums historically, see Bennett (1995). For an overview of the value of cultural organisations and practices, see Crossick and Kasznka (2016).

⁵⁸ Many museums are committed to an educational role in part. Research into public attitudes in the UK suggests that many people see education as part of their role in society today (BritainThinks 2013). These goals can also attract criticisms of paternalism (Bennett 1995).

⁵⁹ For research on the positive effect of museums in evoking feelings of awe/wonder, see Luke's (2021) study of visitors to the Wallace Collection and Tate Britain in London, and Price et al.'s (2021) study on a science museum and various art museums in America.

A related but not purely educational benefit is in promoting (b) *cultural literacy*, as described in Chapter 1. Museums can provide public recognition of,⁶⁰ and affect deeper understanding of, the diversity of beliefs, experiences, and cultures within our societies.⁶¹ In this way, they can help our society to become more cultural literate, by helping to fill gaps in the resources citizens can draw on to understand themselves and each other, and avoid forms of anxiety, ignorance, and confusion that entrench stigma and marginalisation.

Museums can also provide spaces for planned and spontaneous interaction among citizens (Museums Association 2012, p. 8).⁶² They can be spaces for public events, performances, and programmes where participants can exchange perspectives, feel heard, and gain confidence to participate in civil society. Museums can therefore facilitate (c) *social inclusion*, for which there are collective benefits. A society that invests in communal spaces and programmes (what I will refer to as “communal infrastructure”) also fosters “fraternal or solidaristic social relationships” because it makes participation in civil society less determined by factors like gender, race, or class (Brighouse and Swift 2006, p. 481).⁶³ Health practitioners increasingly recognise this potential through “social prescribing”, whereby patients are linked with community organisations to partake in activities that help reduce the long-term effects of different health conditions, isolation, and loneliness (Fancourt and Finn 2019, Museums Association 2013, p. 6).

Museums can also assist with equality of opportunity in cultural careers and beyond. They provide direct opportunities for various forms of work, such as that of a curator, exhibited artist, critic, museum manager, or tour guide.⁶⁴ They may also encourage careers of those they don’t employ, for example, by illustrating that creative careers are possible, and helping people to dream of different futures for themselves. Cultural media that depict people of diverse

⁶⁰ When our heritage, beliefs, and experiences are represented in museums, this can have an affirmational effect and evoke pride. Research on public attitudes in the UK suggests that through the “preservation of national heritage”, museums provide a source of national pride (BritainThinks 2013, p. 4). These effects can also be seen in particular communities. For instance, representation of LGBTQ+ communities can support pride among LGBTQ+ communities (see e.g. Sandell 2016, for a detailed case study from the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow).

⁶¹ Museums can support our self-understanding by facilitating encounters with, and influence over, cultural materials that reflect or explore our cultural history, experiences, and beliefs (see e.g. Rounds 2006). This role can also be considered at the level of groups, e.g. with respect to how communities interpret and narrate their past (see e.g. Crooke 2012). Museums can also support our understanding of others through providing exposure to materials that explore a diversity of histories, experiences, and beliefs. Chapter 4 critically engages with these ideas via debates about the proper role of collaboration in museums.

⁶² Such spaces appear to play a strong role in the feelings of inclusion, belonging, and attachment in cities (Wolff and de-Shalit 2023, pp. 69–70, Knight Foundation and Gallup, n.d., see Museums Association 2012, p. 8, for a recent survey of these effects in UK museums). For a philosophical account of the importance of such spaces in diverse societies, see Young (2011, pp. 240–01). Public spaces can also evoke feelings of social inclusion and attachment in problematic ways (Moreton-Robinson 2020, Cunningham and Savage 2015).

⁶³ Communal infrastructure also includes things like parks and playgrounds, sporting facilities, libraries, and youth clubs.

⁶⁴ Although museums (and their funders) may not see their value primarily in terms of enabling cultural careers, this is still one of their *de facto* valuable functions, since museums need employees and contributors with specialist skills and knowledge to operate, and these jobs are valuable.

backgrounds in esteemed positions can help people to expand their sense of what is possible, and to feel their ambitions are in reach.⁶⁵ For instance, museums might explore the contributions of women and minoritised groups to science and politics. Through targeted efforts, museums can therefore help promote (d) *fair equality of opportunity*, so that competition is less predetermined by factors like gender, race, or class (Gingerich 2019).⁶⁶

2.2 Allocating Benefits

These benefits have general civic appeal. Besides any interest we have in attaining them for ourselves, they also have shared aspects. In promoting cultural literacy or social inclusion, we seem to be supporting general characteristics of a society that we all stand to benefit from as citizens, even when we aren't the direct beneficiaries of specific investments. On the other hand, some of these benefits are *rival*. Museum locals will enjoy more convenient access, lower or nil costs of commuting for visits or any possible employment, and any positive spill-over benefits to local businesses and real estate.

As I suggested earlier, there are ways of thinking about the value of increased cultural accessibility that don't necessarily prioritise disadvantaged groups or require us to focus on equality. We could just promote museum attendance for the education and enjoyment it brings, which is valuable for its own sake (or for other, non-fairness-based instrumental reasons). And regardless of whether the primary beneficiaries are advantaged groups, policies promoting educational and cultural opportunities can yield collective benefits, e.g. in cultural literacy.⁶⁷

However, I want to defend a more explicitly fairness-based view of Openness. And as I highlight in the sections that follow, the considerations offered in favour of free admissions often express a similar sentiment. They emphasise the importance of inclusion and solidarity, stressing "that culture is for everyone, not just the lucky few", and that ticketing "would immediately exclude a vast proportion of our society" (Smith 2015). In my view, a fairness-based approach to cultural accessibility calls on us to prioritise measures that are, relative to other options, likely to improve cultural opportunities for less advantaged groups. I am advocating for a *prioritarian* view of Openness.

⁶⁵ Sandell (2007) discusses the role of museums in challenging stereotypes and prejudices. This role is comparable to that of other cultural forms like music, television, and film (cf. Yuen 2019). For seminal work on how gendered representation in visual art reproduces barriers to women in the art world, see Nochlin (2021).

⁶⁶ For an account of equality of cultural opportunity that takes both consumers and producers into account, see Gingerich (2019).

⁶⁷ The shared benefits of a culturally literate society relate to people of different backgrounds gaining an understanding of each other's culture and experiences. Some of these benefits could be realised—perhaps even more efficiently—via a policy that mainly promoted cultural literacy for wealthier citizens. Poorer citizens could benefit from living in a society where wealthier citizens had a better understanding of their experiences, beliefs, and histories, even if they weren't given much state-backed support to develop an understanding of their own experiences etc., or those of wealthier citizens.

2.3 A Prioritarian View

Prioritarianism is a principle of distributive justice: it tells us how we should distribute advantages between individuals. Specifically, it says that we should assign priority to the worst-off in how we distribute such advantages. A prioritarian view of Openness says that cultural access is worth promoting for everyone but is especially valuable for the worst-off. Applied to museums funding, this means that the benefits of museums spending should be allocated in a way that favours less advantaged groups. Before explaining this appeal of this conception of Openness, it helps to explain the general appeal of fairness-laden views of Openness.

One reason why I am attracted to a fairness-laden view is that cultural policies can sometimes promote competitive or “positional” goods (Hirsch 1976). These are goods whose value for us partly depends on how much others have. Museums aren’t ordinarily thought of as supplying competitive goods. It is much more common to discuss the intrinsic or shared value of the benefits they provide. Even when we emphasise their educational utility, this is not usually construed in terms of competitive advantages.

However, the educational and cultural benefits of museums also have competitive aspects. For instance, the utility of my cultural, historical, or art-historical knowledge seems partly determined by how much others possess. If I am the only person in my community with art-history knowledge, I enjoy a kind of monopoly in the marketplace for art historians. As others gain more expertise than me, my expertise becomes less competitively valuable. So those who trade (or want to trade) in the provision of cultural skills stand to lose, in some ways, from their neighbours gaining more. Museum attendance supports these kinds of skills. This means that inequality of convenient museum access can promote unfair competition.

It is important not to overstate these benefits.⁶⁸ By contrast, formal education is a *paradigm* competitive good (Hollis 1982, Brighouse and Swift 2006). Higher levels of formal education help individuals to attain positions of advantage, for example, in labour markets. Museum attendance would hardly compete with formal education in these respects. The benefits of children attending well-resourced schools or having a private tutor are likely to be far greater than museum attendance. And even in domains where it is more likely to play a pronounced role—in tracking citizens toward arts and cultural jobs—it won’t always be a key factor.

However, museum attendance can still help us attain advantaged positions. For instance, whether an individual and their parents attend museums has been found to be a predictor of access to elite American universities, even while controlling for things like socio-economic status,

⁶⁸ For a sceptical view on museums providing educational benefits to school students, see Stopforth and Gayle (2002). Other studies suggest that attendance promotes educational success, but that this effect is either limited to, or stronger for, children from higher socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. Jæger 2011, Nordlander 2015).

gender, math and reading scores, and self-esteem (Kaufman and Gabler 2004). Museum attendance in England has also been associated with better long-term health (see e.g. Fancourt and Steptoe 2019, Crossick and Kaszniska 2016, pp. 106–10).⁶⁹ Again, this is true even while controlling for other variables, such as socio-economic status, gender, and other demographic variables.

And even if museums don't give us specialised knowledge, they can still help in transmitting "cultural capital", that is, an understanding of social norms linked with upward mobility and higher social status (Bourdieu 1986, see Bennett et al. 2009 for analysis in contemporary Britain). The people most likely to work at and attend museums are well-educated, upper-income groups (McAndrew et al. 2024).⁷⁰ In that way, museums are *de facto* settings of exposure and practice for ways of thinking and speaking that are more common to the upper-middle class. Greater familiarity with this stuff helps remove social barriers to attaining positions where related norms are in play.⁷¹

Of course, it is important to keep a discussion of the competitive benefits of museums in the context of their many other roles and values. As my overall argument emphasises, museums have *civic value*. Promoting competitive benefits is obviously not all that they do. Nor can they all do this in the same way or to the same degree (they vary in their resources, subject matter, and so on). Moreover, any such benefits are not exclusive to those with higher educational attainment, since many museum visitors don't fit that profile.

Still, the competitive aspects of museums funding are a part of the overall picture, and they deserve attention. Even if the effects in question are subtle, they can still be significant, especially if they accumulate in certain groups and regions over time. If museums cluster in wealthier areas, or their offerings are for whatever reason inaccessible to disadvantaged groups, they become a factor in maintaining the positional advantages some groups already enjoy (Cunningham and Savage 2015).

This suggests that *fair equality of opportunity* could be a useful principle in decisions about museum location, design, and funding. Perhaps citizens deserve relatively equal access to some of the opportunities museums provide. This isn't necessarily to promote fair access to cultural careers (though this is one reason), but in order to prevent unfair competitions in other areas.

However, concerns about inequality of opportunity can also be captured within a prioritarian view of museums funding. That's because, where an unequal distribution of goods is bad for the

⁶⁹ Brighouse and Swift (2006) also highlight the competitive aspects of health.

⁷⁰ While museum professionals aren't always paid much, they are likely to come from wealthier backgrounds.

⁷¹ People with higher levels of cross-cultural literacy won't always have higher social status and vice versa. But my point is just that, due to facts about the institutions through which we might aim to transmit cultural literacy (e.g. universities, schools, museums), cultural literacy policies can support the transmission of cultural capital indirectly, even when they fail to teach cultural literacy.

worst-off, we don't have to be egalitarians to want to try to mitigate that inequality (Brighthouse and Swift 2006, p. 482). We might even *prefer* a prioritarian view of Openness because we suspect that the competitive advantages of greater museum access are relatively trivial, at least compared with education. Or perhaps we think that a purely egalitarian framing of cultural access would fail to capture the non-competitive value of museums attendance, or that it would be impossible or undesirable to achieve equality of museum access (see e.g. Bennett 1995, pp. 90–105).

Regardless of how persuaded we are by any of these concerns, we still have reasons to prioritise the less advantaged in our spending patterns. By enhancing access for those who have the least, museums infrastructure becomes more supportive of social inclusion. Not only would this seem to capture the fairness-related aspects of arguments for free admissions, but it would also seem to foster fraternal or solidaristic social relationships for all. To be clear, these considerations can also be accepted by some egalitarians, so long as they accept the civic and intrinsic value of museums attendance.⁷² Why, then, should we favour a prioritarian view?

The main payoff is dialectical. I have argued that the competitive aspects of cultural goods in museums generate concerns of fairness that can be accommodated by fair equality of opportunity. However, some of the claims I am making about the competitive nature of museums spending attract reasonable disagreement, because the relationship between museum spending and individual advantages is complex. Simply visiting or living near a museum does not guarantee advantages in health, education, employment, or wealth. Many other variables are in play, and the effects in question are more like amplifiers of background inequalities than they are direct causes of inequalities between individuals. In other words, museums spending does not distribute paradigm positional goods in the way that education spending does. As a result, some people might say that the competitive aspects of museums spending are not enough to justify a purely egalitarian framing. A prioritarian conception of Openness is therefore preferable, because it allows us to mitigate unfair advantages resulting from museums funding without implying a controversial thesis about the competitive dimensions of cultural goods. For all these reasons, I adopt a prioritarian conception of Openness in this chapter.⁷³

⁷² My conclusions can only be accepted by some egalitarians, namely, those who are value pluralists. These theorists can account for the intrinsic and civic value of museums, and so they escape the levelling-down objection that I consider in [Section 6](#).

⁷³ A related question concerns the *urgency* of cultural accessibility initiatives. Would benefits (a)–(d) materialise for citizens, to some reasonable degree, without public funding for arts and museums? This is a difficult contextual question. Fortunately, we can make progress on the ethics of free admissions without a precise answer. Considerations of fairness apply to museum spending regardless of how urgent it is, because it purports to serve the public interest, uses public money, and has rival effects.

3. Arguments for Free Museums in England

The UK's policy of incentivising free admissions to museums indicates a vision for attaining Openness in museums. Its proponents appeal to (1) effects on audience representation, (2) cultural opportunities, and (3) feelings of cultural patrimony, that is, a sense that the materials held in museums belong to them, as part of their cultural inheritance.

3.1 *More Representative Audiences*

This argument involves a normative and an empirical claim. The normative claim is that, to promote benefits of education and inclusion for all, resources should be allocated to make museum audiences more representative of a society's demographics.⁷⁴ The empirical claim is that free admissions effectively promote this. I want to focus on the empirical claim, as it is often asserted in public debate without evidence. To be more precise, proponents of the national free admissions policy will often refer to the *wrong kind* of evidence for this claim. They will cite statistics showing large audience increases under the free admissions policy, without attending to *which groups* comprise those audiences, and whether the makeup has changed.⁷⁵

It helps to register a few facts about cultural participation in the UK. Research carried out in 2016 says that upper socio-economic groups accounted for about 60% of (free and paid) museum visitors, despite representing 22% of the population. Lower socio-economic groups meanwhile represented about 25% of visitors, despite representing 47% of the population (DC Research 2016, p. 16).

Given that the More Representative Audiences argument forms part of the official justification for the policy, we might expect to find some support for the empirical claim in the UK context (DCMS 2018, p. 11). But government-commissioned research suggested that “charging does not affect the social mix of visitors to museums”, and that there is “very little difference between the proportions of different social grades of visitors to free admission sites and to paid admission

⁷⁴ Social inclusion and education were key policy goals during the originating New Labour period of this policy (DCMS 2001). A commitment to inclusion is now asserted through the phrase that museums are for, and should benefit, everyone, “not just the privileged few” (e.g. Mendoza 2017, p. 88, DCMS 2018, p. 11). For an illustration of this argument in the literature on museums accessibility, see Lin 2012, p. 216.

⁷⁵ While discussions in museum studies are nuanced (e.g. Lin 2012), I am referring to public debate and government justification on this specific policy. Consider former culture secretary Chris Smith's remarks. He writes that abolishing free admissions “would exclude a vast proportion of our society. It would reduce visitor numbers drastically” (Smith 2015). It is true that it would reduce visits. However, the suggestion that charging would mainly deter less well-off groups is only true if these groups attend free museums to a *greater degree*. This is not indicated by higher numbers of attendance at free museums alone—it requires a demographic analysis between free and charging museums.

sites” (DC Research 2016, p. 15).⁷⁶ A more recent report found that in about 60% of cases museums moving from free to ticketed reported no change in visitor demographics (DC Research and Durnin Research 2023, p. 28). On the other hand, those moving in the other direction—from ticketed to free—reported positive impacts on audience diversity in about 70% of cases.

Unsurprisingly, then, audience diversity varies between free museums and exhibits. Some museums don’t report a change to their demographics once they become free, but others do (DC Research and Durnin Research 2023, pp. 25–28).⁷⁷ For instance, when fees were recently removed at the historic house and garden Oakwell Hall (Yorkshire, England), this had a positive effect on audience diversity, along with increased visitors (DC Research and Durnin Research 2023, p. 26). Similarly, Cyfarthfa Castle Museum & Art Gallery (Merthyr Tydfil, Wales) reports that abolishing free admission negatively affected diversity of visitors, along with reducing overall visits (DC Research and Durnin Research 2023, p. 29).

The diverse nature of museums, combined with a lack of comprehensive data, makes it difficult to construct a detailed diagnosis of why free admission sometimes helps in diversifying audiences.⁷⁸ However, much of this variation appears to be explained by what *other accessibility initiatives* are in use, and to what degree. Case studies suggest that museums (free and ticketed) attract broader audiences when they hold events or exhibitions related to and engaging with marginalised and minoritised groups, when they engage collaboratively with communities, and market these initiatives over time.⁷⁹ Reflecting this, Tristram Hunt (director of the V&A) recently said that:

[F]ree entry has never been a panacea. Since its introduction, diversifying audiences has shown itself to be far more dependent upon programming and the removal of invisible racial or social barriers than admission prices. Some of Britain’s pay-to-enter museums – not least the Black

⁷⁶ DC Research’s (2016) study was commissioned by the Association of Independent Museums (AIM), with Arts Council England (ACE) and the Museums Archives and Libraries Division (MALD) of the Welsh Government and published in 2023. The review carried out a “sector-wide survey of museums across the UK”. Museums were asked to assess the effects of free admission on audience diversity. Of the responding museums, 74.8% (229/306) were based in England. They report that “whilst 68% of museums that do not charge for admissions feel that this has a positive or very positive impact on the mix of visitors, 58% of those that do charge report that charges have no impact on the mix or diversity of visitors” (DC Research 2016, p. 15). They go on: “There are museums that are the exception to this pattern – achieving a social mix and diversity of visitor that reflects their community, but these are not distinguished by whether they charge for admissions or not” (DC Research 2016, p. 16).

⁷⁷ For similar findings from an earlier point in the life of this policy see Cowell (2007).

⁷⁸ One reported factor is that free admissions can encourage relationship-building with local communities (DC Research 2016).

⁷⁹ For case studies of targeted programming see Sandell (2004). For case studies of co-curation, see Museums Association (2013), Sandell (2016). Of course, targeted programming is no panacea either (Ang 2018), and it should resist boxing identities or representing histories and groups as fixed. For detailed qualitative analysis on the drivers for why people of different backgrounds engage with various forms of culture, see Bennett et al. (2009).

Country Living Museum – have a far more impressive track record in widening access than many free nationals. (Hunt 2024)⁸⁰

In short, the takeaway is not that free admissions *cannot* play a role in promoting audience diversity at some museums and exhibits, but that they don't appear to have shifted the overall proportion of attendance between groups, averaged across museums, through the life of this policy.⁸¹

This finding is broadly consistent with research from Sweden and America. A recent review of free admissions in Sweden found that the main museums benefiting from a similar scheme didn't see an increase in audience representation (Swedish Agency for Cultural Analysis 2023, pp. 24–26). A 2015 report into barriers to arts participation across the United States also found that the primary motivations for attendance across underrepresented groups were a desire to support their communities, celebrate cultural heritage, and gain knowledge (National Endowment for the Arts 2015). The same report found that “for some—and especially for racial and ethnic minorities—not having anyone to go with and difficulty in getting to the venue are more significant barriers than the price of admission” (National Endowment for the Arts 2015, p. 49). The most decisive factors in attracting new audiences in the US include cultural representation in the events and programmes on offer (e.g. whether they reflect and celebrate the cultures of underrepresented groups), their location, awareness that the events are taking place, and having time to go (Hood 2004, National Endowment for the Arts 2015).

To be clear, free admissions do have a significant effect in boosting attendance overall. The question we are focused on here, though, is whether they are an effective strategy for attracting audiences that wouldn't otherwise be attending. Moreover, the question is not whether there is *some* increase in these audiences, but whether the effect of increased attendance is statistically significant. Specifically: does increased attendance under free admissions correlate with a higher proportion of visitors from less advantaged groups in a way that is unlikely to be due to chance, and robust after controlling for other variables such as overall visitor increases across all groups? This is an important question in part because a large portion of visitors to major museums under this scheme are tourists (who accounted for roughly a third of national museums visitors in London, pre-COVID), and repeat visitors from upper-income groups.

The overall finding is that free admissions aren't by themselves an effective way of diversifying audiences. Their success appears to ride on a range of other accessibility measures being pursued.

⁸⁰ DC Research's work on the UK museums sector indicates a general appreciation for this view in the sector (2016, p. 15).

⁸¹ This is also reflected in non-government-affiliated research on attendance of art museums in the UK carried out by Bennett et al. (2009, p. 123). Analysing DCMS statistics on museum attendance, the Swedish Agency for Cultural Analysis reach the same conclusion (2023, p. 26).

We also have *prima facie* evidence to doubt the effectiveness of a nation-wide policy of free admission if the main museums being sponsored require transport that poor people can't afford.

However, another response would be to question the normative premise of the More Representative Audiences argument. Why should we take increased attendance among less advantaged audiences as reflective or constitutive of fairness? Audience diversity cannot capture all the value of cultural accessibility. A society with greater attendance at museums might be a more culturally literate or educated society, and a focus on *proportional increases* can obscure or disvalue this achievement. And even if we are aiming to increase attendance for disadvantaged groups, or we at least take the attendance gap as an indicator of whether a policy is reaching everyone, we should not dismiss the value of increased museum attendance overall.⁸² So while this argument is empirically flawed, a broader takeaway is that the value of cultural access should not be *reduced* to audience diversity.

3.2 Increased Opportunity

Instead of relying on an outcomes-based argument, we might appeal to the value of being able to visit museums, irrespective of where we live and our disposable income. We might want to say that individuals benefit from the *opportunity* to engage with the goods museums generally offer. An emphasis on increased access/opportunity is reflected in the official justifications for free admissions in the UK:

The Government is determined to enable more people of *all ages and backgrounds* to visit museums and learn from the country's treasures. The new funding ... will *improve access* to the best of our cultural heritage, and therefore educational *opportunities for all*. (Smith, in LGC 1998, my emphases)

And more recently:

The UK's brilliant museums and galleries can be proud of the huge range of free exhibitions they put on and the role they play in *increasing access* to arts and culture. We want to see even more museums offering free entry, and to support organisations which are providing great *opportunities* for the public to enjoy. I encourage cultural institutions across the UK to apply for the [tax] refund scheme so they can help make sure *people from all backgrounds get to*

⁸² There is a further consideration: repeat visits may have diminishing returns (e.g. in education, enjoyment), so increased visits from disadvantaged groups may be 'worth more'. If that's right, then free admissions may actually *promote* equality of opportunity even when they don't close the attendance gap. Whether this is true depends on how we conceive of equality of opportunity, and on whether the overall distribution of museums is consistent with it. While I'm not denying that some forms of cultural participation have diminishing returns, this consideration wouldn't necessarily recommend free admissions, since considerations of cost-effectiveness ([Section 5](#)), and an unfair concentration of opportunities in advantaged regions ([Section 6](#)), also arise.

experience great arts and culture for free. (Lord Parkinson, in Parkinson and DCMS 2022, my emphases)

But how might free admissions increase opportunities for all? The suggestion is that museums hold resources that individuals benefit from being able to access, for the sake of learning and enjoyment. These benefits are realised through attendance. Making museums free removes barriers to attendance. By helping to make more museums free across the country, individuals everywhere are in a better position to engage with the goods museums offer.

It is worth noting that while there is no explicit mention of fairness or equality in these quotations, the reasoning has a solidaristic or inclusive tone. The scheme is about promoting opportunities for people of *all ages and backgrounds*. But the suggestion of how free museums would be universally promoting cultural opportunities presupposes a relatively fair or optimal distribution of them. However, given the way this policy is written, it does not *itself* bring new museums into existence, encourage larger museums to partially relocate, demand that they send works on tour, or carry out practices of community outreach and diverse programming and co-curation. In this sense, its aim is to support museums to be free, in relative independence of their geographic positioning and the kinds of curatorial and outreach practices museums are using.⁸³

It is now worth pausing on the point about geographic positioning. On its face, the distribution of free museums may seem fair. The list of currently supported institutions indicates a spread of free museums across England.⁸⁴ London also has the lowest proportion of museums per capita (Candlin et al. 2022, p. 48). But this hides the fact that cultural resources concentrate in cities, and the historic accumulation of resources in London especially (Savage 2016).⁸⁵ For instance, major support is provided to 15 *specific*, free national museums, nine of which are based solely in London (e.g. the British Museum, the V&A, the National Gallery) where just 16% of the English population resides.⁸⁶ On top of national funding, it is consistently found that the majority of private donations go to London-based cultural organisations (e.g. 66% in 2017/18) which also receive more local government support (ACE 2022, p. 4, p. 14).

⁸³ Some may prefer an alternative reading of the policy, as holistically integrated with a collection of measures that museums/government bodies are pursuing to promote cultural opportunities. By contrast, I am focusing on this public policy *by itself*, and as it is written in legislation and described by government. This focus is justified because (a) the policy is based in legislation that has attracted its own debate, and (b) because it is possible that it mainly correlates with other measures, rather than drives them. If this is right, then the current VAT legislation could be dropped or rewritten to promote other measures instead or as well.

⁸⁴ For the full list, see HM Revenue & Customs (2021).

⁸⁵ See Savage (2016) for a sophisticated analysis of spatial inequality in the UK, which both highlights the concentration of cultural and economic capital in London, and illustrates various inequalities within metropolises across the UK, hence within and beyond London.

⁸⁶ Seven national museums have outposts in other cities, e.g. the Tate has a major branch in Liverpool, and the Imperial War Museum in Manchester. Royal Armouries and the Science Museums Group are also mostly outside London (see the [Appendix](#)).

Referring more generally to public funding for arts and culture, one report estimated that spending in 2012 “produce[d] a benefit per head of population in [London] of £68.99 compared to £4.58 in the rest of England (6.6% of London levels)” (Stark et al. 2013, p 8). The same report estimated that 90% of DCMS grants-in-aid into the national museum system went into London in 2013. While things appear to have improved since then, Londoners benefited at least four times more in average spending than English residents outside London through the scheme we are discussing (2017–22, see the [Appendix](#), Table [A2](#)).⁸⁷

These observations undermine the assumption that the background distribution of goods that this policy opens access to is fair.⁸⁸ However, maybe the centralisation of resources has the virtue of being *efficient*? While Londoners are likely to be overrepresented in the English visitors at national museums, those museums still draw visitors from all over England. English transport is geared towards London. While it might cost a lot of money for some to get there, when they arrive, national museums are free. In this respect, a decentralised arrangement would be much less convenient. If national museums were more equally distributed, seeing them all would require a lot more travel, and perhaps they would have fewer visitors overall.

But unless an efficiency-based view of centralisation is going to completely do away with concerns of fairness, there would still be a threshold above which the virtues of centralisation were threatened by concerns of fairness. While efficiency might call for some museums to be solely based in London, it doesn’t justify *most* of them only being there. The justifications offered above—even if not explicitly about equality or prioritising less advantaged groups—emphasise the value of giving cultural opportunities to all.

3.3 Audience Experience

A final view says that free museums provide educational or cultural benefits by allowing audiences to spontaneously engage with their cultural inheritance. Tickets, subscriptions, and private membership obstruct or prevent us from gaining a sense that a national or public museum contains things that belong to the citizenry. They make museum access feel conditional, as opposed to something that is equally open to us, like a public park (Anderson 1993, p. 160). Why should this matter? Because if a museum doesn’t *feel* like a shared space, it might not support learning and appreciation of the right kind. We might not see the things around us as part of our shared heritage. Instead, they belong to the museum, its managers, or some other

⁸⁷ The Arts Council of England has been redirecting funding in recent rounds to help correct for their historic London focus, but I’m focused on DCMS.

⁸⁸ This isn’t to say that London’s museums serve Londoners fairly. A between-regions focus doesn’t discount issues *within* London.

group we are not part of.⁸⁹ Cultural critic Charlotte Higgins provides a moving portrayal of this view:

I remember walking into the National Gallery one day in the mid-1990s. I was in my early 20s, enjoying a new life in London, and was able to duck in, on a whim, through that great portico on Trafalgar Square because the museum had not introduced charges – as so many institutions, including the Natural History and Science museums, had been encouraged to do under Thatcher. Wandering around, pausing to drink in the glorious complexities of Titian’s *Ariadne and Bacchus* [sic], I had a sudden revelation: this masterpiece, this brightly burning cultural beacon, was mine. It, and all the other pictures in this great gallery, belonged to me, and every citizen of Britain. What riches, what a shared inheritance! I still experience that exhilaration every time I enter a national museum – a feeling it is quite impossible to have if you pass through a turnstile, your permission to be there contingent on a financial transaction. (Higgins 2011)

One of the claims being suggested is that museums/cultural policies should try to foster feelings of common ownership or cultural patrimony over national collections. Another is that this goal is advanced by free admissions. Of course, we might question whether feelings of cultural patrimony are supported by free admissions. But it seems plausible that the introduction of charges would negatively affect the kind of experience Higgins describes.

The core point I want to make in response to this kind of argument is, again, about the geographic positioning of England’s national museums.⁹⁰ The argument implicitly assumes that the national museum system is already well positioned to reach all or most British citizens. So long as a national museum is free, citizens are likely to feel welcomed, and disposed towards feelings of cultural patrimony once there.

Those who cherish major museums might themselves experience a form of cultural patrimony because of their being free to everybody. But what about those who never see a Titian, because they don’t or can’t visit a museum with this kind of collection? Simply making England’s national museums free to access doesn’t effectively promote a sense of cultural patrimony for all or most people. Many still live far away from national museums, or for other reasons aren’t physically able to visit them.⁹¹

⁸⁹ This view is not uncommon. Cultural critic Mark Brown writes, “[t]he policy ... does not have too many detractors – the public does, after all, own the contents” (Brown 2018). In the Swedish context, Birgitta Rubin also says: “It goes without saying that accessibility must also be valued from a democratic point of view ... free entry has applied to museum collections, which all Swedes own together” (Rubin 2022, translated). Similar points were raised by critics of the MET’s admissions fees (Mittman 2018).

⁹⁰ Another criticism involves questioning whether national collections are a fitting object for feelings of cultural patrimony. Do they represent the heritage of the whole British public? Perhaps not everyone sees their heritage reflected in a Titian. National cultural patrimony also relates to debates about repatriation. I consider surrounding debates in [Chapter 4](#).

⁹¹ For a related discussion about how the spatial arrangements of cities shape an individual’s “*genuine opportunities*”, see Wolff and de-Shalit (2023, pp. 64–65).

The wider point that Higgins is making is that free admissions can enrich experiences and evoke pride. These are valuable goals of museums. And to be sure, Higgins isn't saying that people magically get a sense of their cultural inheritance simply through the existence of free museums. She is suggesting that free admissions are an effective means of imparting these feelings. I accept that free admissions can help with this, but only insofar as museums are already doing a good job at expanding the ability of all members of a society to engage with them. At a minimum, this means attending more closely to allocations of resources across regions.

4. How Free Admissions Can Undermine Openness

The above arguments express a certain vision of how to promote cultural accessibility. This vision avows the importance of making cultural goods more accessible to everybody, regardless of how poor or marginalised they are. However, if proponents of a nation-wide free admissions policy genuinely want museums to be more accessible to those who currently enjoy least access to them, they should prioritise a distributive programme that takes effective steps to reduce social, economic, and geographic barriers to access. A general policy of free admissions appears to be a surprisingly bad strategy if other practices—relating to geographic reach of affordable, diverse cultural goods—are not already in effect. In the context of museums spending in England, these efforts not only require more investment, but are constrained by the centralisation of resources in London. This case study therefore serves as an example of how free admissions can undermine a prioritarian commitment of Openness: they (1) are *ineffective* at promoting it by themselves, and (2) may under some conditions be *damaging* to it.

Free admissions are ineffective, for instance, insofar as they leave regions lacking in comparable infrastructure worse off than they would have been if they were allocated the resources that free admissions consume. This criticism works by the *degree to which* free admissions absorb resources that could be allocated to efforts that more directly target less well-off groups (including to projects at the same museum). It therefore targets big museums in more developed regions which are likely to continue attracting large numbers of visitors even when they charge, and which can pursue other accessibility-promoting measures without free admission. Moreover, this criticism doesn't depend on the competitive aspects of the benefits museums promote. It is about a failure to improve in an effective and targeted way the actual cultural opportunities of less advantaged groups.

In response, proponents of free admissions might say that they want this kind of 'levelling up' agenda *as well*, and that they don't expect free admissions to do all the work. That seems fair. However, where that extra work is neglected, free admissions can make things worse. To see this, recall how museums provide benefits with competitive aspects, such as informal education and increased cultural capital. The value of my understanding of culture, arts, and history, and social

norms linked with upward mobility, is not just determined by how good it is, but also on how good it is compared to other people's. By removing a barrier to attaining these things, free admissions to major museums confer positional competitive advantages on those closer to them, and thereby make those living further away (especially disadvantaged people) worse off than they otherwise would have been. Once again, this criticism works by degree. Not all museums confer advantages on those near to them, or at least not in a way that raises concerns of fairness and equality. This second criticism comes into effect especially in cases where opportunities have accumulated in regions where residents already enjoy other advantages. Even if these effects are subtle at the scale of single individuals and institutions, they can be significant when taken together, and hence this criticism applies especially to cases of centralised cultural infrastructure, like London vis-à-vis England, and accrues over time.⁹²

Despite all this, free admissions to major museums in advantaged areas may provide an *appearance* that Openness is being promoted (cf. Táiwò 2022, Rilinger 2023).⁹³ They seem to act as symbols of increased accessibility (Wolff and de-Shalit 2023, p. 137) and to evoke national pride. Obviously, such symbols and feelings are not generically bad. But when an institution or policy evokes these perceptions and feelings, it becomes more difficult to recognise its flaws. Criticism would seem to involve undermining national achievements and threatening civic bonds. By protecting an overall funding arrangement from criticism, freely accessible institutions help stabilise the status quo. By assigning a *perceived property* of Openness to existing arrangements, free admissions can help to protect positional advantages of privileged groups.⁹⁴

5. Explaining the Ineffectiveness Criticism

The first criticism I am making is that free admissions can be *ineffective* (in terms of efficiency, and cost-effectiveness) at promoting Openness, relative to other options. By prioritising one strategy of opening museum offerings to all (e.g. affordability) without also attending to others (e.g. geographic reach), we can end up arbitrarily favouring some citizens (e.g. Londoners) over

⁹² For analysis of the social, economic, and political dominance of London in the UK, see Savage (2016, pp. 151–72).

⁹³ Those who benefit the least from a country's major cultural investments might say that arts funding isn't meant for people like them. In suggesting that free admissions obscure unfairness, my focus isn't on *these* individuals. I'm referring to those who characteristically benefit from existing arrangements.

⁹⁴ To be clear, this is a hypothesis. However, it isn't an empty one. An "obscuring effect" helps to explain why London favouritism in museums funding has been historically stable while other areas of arts funding have come in for reform. The effect is evidenced in the opening pages of 'The Mendoza Review: An Independent Review of Museums in England': "It is important to clarify that *this Review does not cover the policy of free admission to the permanent collections of national museums*. We are aware that this is a major intervention in the sector and certainly influences the way it functions, and that many would like to see this policy discussed and challenged. But, because it is a manifesto commitment, it is not a part of this Review. I have come around to the view passionately argued by one national museum director, that we should be proud of this policy ... [W]e should ... *proclaim to the world that, unlike in many other countries, our great national museums are open to all and free to all*" (Mendoza 2017, p. 8, my emphases).

others, and failing to effectively advance the interests of disadvantaged groups elsewhere (e.g. in the north of England). To draw these competing goals into focus:

1. Affordability: the extent to which funding promotes affordable access to cultural goods for all or most citizens, for example, via a national museum system.
2. Geographic reach: the extent to which funding distributes cultural goods across regions so that, for example, all or most individuals enjoy a fair level of geographic access to some of the key parts of a national museum system.

Affordability is a deeply important goal. It is difficult to see how museums could achieve their goals of 'being open to everyone' if their pricing effectively locked out lower-income groups. This is underscored by the fact that, historically, art collections played an overt role in undercutting fraternal social relationships by being the reserve of elites.

However, the goal of making museum offerings *affordable* is not undermined just by their being ticketed, since admissions could also be, for example, £5 for all, or free to residents but paid for tourists, or paid for many residents and all tourists but free to target groups such as schools, students, and pensioners, or in addition, free to access periodically. These are the kinds of arrangements that a prioritarian view of Openness encourages us to explore.

Moreover, without attending to geographic reach, the power of major museums to reach less advantaged social groups is limited. This is for the simple reason that in many countries—and England is no exception—poor and marginalised groups are spread out. Given the current 'geographic shape' of national museums in England, the goal of making them universally free should be assigned less priority than developing institutions and carrying out outreach activities in the north of England. This is one way in which free admissions can draw resources away from poor and marginalised groups.

One of the points I am making, then, is that free admissions at major museums consume/forgo a significant number of resources, and another is that these could be better allocated. To explain this, assume that the public money devoted to maintaining free admission at England's largest national museums accounts for only 10% of the national museums funding budget. This would mean that the current fiscal debate about free admissions turns on a relatively small sum of ~£45 m per year.⁹⁵ This figure would hardly contribute to the goal of building and supporting institutions in, for example, Birmingham, Blackpool, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, and Nottingham, let alone most or all of these places. Perhaps, then, the expected financial gains from ticketing would not be worth the cost of deterring less well-off groups.

⁹⁵ As George Strauss asked Thatcher: "Is it really worthwhile imposing entrance charges to raise this derisory sum?" (Hansard 1973).

However, a figure of £45 m would rival some of the other major sources of national funding currently running towards museums that do not have the official ‘national’ title. The Arts Council of England had an average spend of £67.5 m (2017–22) on museums, and the National Lottery Heritage Fund £33.6 m (2017–22) (DC Research and Wavehill 2024, p. 60, see the [Appendix](#), Tables [A5](#) and [A6](#)). In other words, this *would* make a significant contribution to levelling up across regions.

I am assuming that a feasible policy reform in this area would not scrap this portion of national museums funding (e.g. 10%) but re-allocate it (indeed, hopefully expand it). However, the money generated through abolishing or adjusting free admissions at the largest museums would be more than whatever this amount turned out to be. It would also include any revenue to be *gained* through ticketing at a museum (i.e. forgone revenue). We cannot know what that figure would be. But at major museums like the British Museum or the Natural History Museum, it would be substantial.⁹⁶ To illustrate, in 2022/3, the British Museum reports having 2.5 m overseas visitors.⁹⁷ If just half of those overseas visitors paid £15 for initial entry, this would have generated £18.75 m ($1.25 \text{ m} \times £15$).⁹⁸ This hypothetical scheme would have increased its total self-generated income by approximately 41%.⁹⁹ Some portion of this, I am arguing, ought to be redistributed.

To be clear, I am not advocating for any specific or universal form of ticketing across major museums. I am just drawing attention to what is possible. Moreover, I am not in favour of charging without redistributive measures and/or efforts aimed at promoting inclusivity and democratisation at museums that charge. The moral force of my argument is that these other measures, such as redistribution, participatory outreach, targeted programming, and free entry for some groups, are (a) compatible with charging, and (b) presumptively more powerful and direct than free admissions, in terms of imparting civic benefits to less advantaged groups. If I am right, then the desired benefits of ‘opening up’ museums could be more efficiently and effectively achieved via a policy package that didn’t include free admissions.

⁹⁶ For comparison: the MET in New York generated \$49 m in admissions revenue in the fiscal year 2022/3 (MET, “Annual Report,” 20). According to their report, admissions fees accounted for 16% of the museum’s total revenue, which was US \$307.4 m ($\$307.4 \text{ m} \times 0.16 \approx \49.1 m). Its currently advertised charges are: “\$30 for adults; \$22 for seniors; \$17 for students. Free for Members, Patrons, children under 12, and a caregiver accompanying a visitor with a disability” (<https://engage.metmuseum.org/admission>). I am not saying that the same ticketing scheme is appropriate for the UK’s national museums.

⁹⁷ For data on overseas visitors, see DCMS (2022/23) [Table 4](#).

⁹⁸ For data on self-generated income at national museums, see DCMS (2022/23), [Tables 10, 11, and 12](#). In 2022/23, the British Museum generated £3.1 m from admissions to non-permanent exhibits, £11.2 m from ‘trading’, and £31.3 m from fundraising, totalling £45.6 m.

⁹⁹ $18.75 \text{ m} / 45.6 \text{ m} \approx 0.41$. The large national museums I am alluding to differ in the extent to which they attract tourists, and in their existing levels of self-generated income. For instance, the same hypothetical scheme would have generated less money for the Natural History Museum, producing £12.1 m in new income from ticketing in 2022/23, against an existing self-generated income of £27.92 m. However, this increase would have raised the Natural History Museum’s self-generated income by about the same amount: 43%.

It is worth considering an objection: couldn't some of these resources be allocated towards free museums in the north of England? Am I saying that free admissions are *always* ineffective? The Ineffectiveness Criticism works by the degree to which free admissions absorb resources (*maintenance costs*, and *forgone revenue*) without effectively empowering less advantaged groups, compared with alternatives. This is why it mainly targets major museums, or large, popular museums. It therefore applies especially, if not only, to large institutions in wealthier areas. Hence, concerns about making museums free in Liverpool (or Manchester, Birmingham, etc.) are generally going to be less, since residents of this region on average receive less support, while being on average poorer than those of London. So even if free admissions weren't a major enabler of institutions in less advantaged areas providing benefits to locals, they would still seem more effective than funding free admissions in wealthier areas.¹⁰⁰

My core claim here is that the effectiveness of an institution (whether in Liverpool or London) in promoting benefits for less advantaged groups is not going to be driven by its being universally free. Benefits in (a) education, (b) cultural literacy, (c) social inclusion, and (d) fair access to cultural careers relate more importantly to the social, intellectual, and aesthetic qualities of the programmes on offer. If they aren't speaking to marginalised individuals and groups or offering real opportunities to participate in and influence events and programmes, it is difficult to see how their being free is going to be a significantly enabling factor.

6. Explaining the Damaging Criticism

The second criticism I am making is that free admissions aren't just ineffective but can, under certain conditions, make some things worse – not simply relative to how they would have been if those resources were allocated to some other initiative, but worse compared to a world where all other facts were the same, except that the relevant museums *weren't* made universally free.

The extent to which this criticism applies depends on the facts of the case. It depends upon whether and how much the institution being made free to access (i) confers competitive advantages on its consumers, and (ii) is likely to be accessed by already advantaged groups. To the extent that these conditions apply, free admissions can worsen the position of disadvantaged citizens who are still relatively unlikely to access the benefits in question, even while attracting praise that stabilises the arrangement.

¹⁰⁰ This suggests stronger justification for free museums based in less advantaged areas, e.g. the National Museums Liverpool. Inversely, the *pro tanto* nature of this criticism means that it does not apply evenly to national museums in London, since they vary in their audience size, overall funding arrangements, and therefore how much revenue they consume/forgo through free admission (for instance, compare the relatively small Horniman Museum, outside central London, with the massive British Museum).

Many readers will want to resist this criticism. They might think that I am making too much of the competitive benefits of museums attendance, or that I am making too little of their intrinsic or civic benefits. However, they might also press another criticism. I can be read as saying that just by introducing tickets to national museums in England the cultural conditions of less advantaged groups would in some way be improved. But this might sound absurd. How could the situation of citizens in the most disadvantaged areas in England be improved by introducing tickets to London's major museums?¹⁰¹ Thatcher's policy serves as a useful reference here. It introduced ticketing for national museums, but without redistributing acquired resources. Does my argument provide a justification for it?

Yes and no. Yes, I am committed to saying that Thatcher's policy would in *some* respects have improved the position of less advantaged English citizens over time, relative to a policy of free admissions at all national museums in London. The sense in which it would have done this is by curbing the accumulation of advantages among the advantaged. By imposing slightly higher barriers to access—while maintaining free admissions for “children and old-age pensioners” (Strauss, in Hansard 1973)—it would have helped limit the role that museum attendance plays in reproducing unfair competition in, for example, education, employment, and social mobility.

However, as I have stressed: my account of Openness *would not* recommend a policy of ticketing at major museums by itself. Although I am committed to saying that this kind of arrangement would in some respects have improved (more precisely, protected) the position of less advantaged groups, Thatcher's policy did not take significant steps to improve actual opportunities for less advantaged individuals. Although it aimed to generate more funding for museums through ticketing, the goal was to re-allocate this to existing national institutions concentrated in London.¹⁰² By not adjusting the positioning of England's best-funded museums, it preserved a dynamic whereby English museums funding was still rigged in favour of Londoners.

¹⁰¹ One way of understanding this objection is that I'm encouraging levelling down. There are some cases where levelling down is absurd. Views that recommend levelling down in these cases face a 'levelling-down objection'. For instance, if we think that inequality is bad *in itself*, we imply that the elimination of inequality would always be a change for the better. But suppose we wanted to eliminate inequality of vision. One way to do this would be to remove the eyes of the sighted. We may then be committed to saying that a blind world would be in some sense an improvement, despite not appearing to have improved anything for anybody (Parfit 1991, cf. Casal 2007). These kinds of concerns have often played a role in motivating prioritarianism as a general moral theory. However, as my argument suggests, we don't have to be egalitarians to want to level down in the case of *positional goods*, since an unequal distribution of them can be bad for people. They are bad for people insofar as inequalities in positional goods have material effects on people's welfare, such as where accelerations in higher education pose barriers to employment for those with fewer or no degrees. What's the upshot? Even if we don't see any intrinsic value in equality, we still have reasons for levelling down, based simply on wanting to improve people's welfare, and to prevent threats to it (Brighouse and Swift 2006).

¹⁰² Some levelling-up investments came about while Thatcher was prime minister—e.g. the development of the National Museums Liverpool in 1986, and the opening of Tate Liverpool in 1988—but weren't part of the aims/methods of the policy I'm discussing. See fn. 52.

By contrast, my arguments call for *levelling up*. This is because my argument doesn't just acknowledge the competitive benefits of museums but stresses their civic value. The civic value of museums is not promoted, and is probably undermined, if we simply impose charges at major museums without promoting greater accessibility measures within them and/or carrying out major investments across regions. In terms familiar to egalitarian political theorists: the value of arts and cultural funding does not reduce to the value of fair competition (see Brighouse and Swift 2006, p. 482, on education). It is not hard to see why. Informal education, cultural literacy, and social inclusion are valuable in helping us to understand ourselves and each other, to develop self-confidence, lead autonomous lives, and partake in politics and civil society. These are things we can value for their own sake, or for the sake of a democratic culture, and not necessarily for competitive advantage. Even if Thatcher's policy protected the *positional value* of some people's cultural skills and abilities, and their cultural capital, it wasn't designed in a way that would actively promote real opportunities and civic benefits for England's less advantaged citizens. So while the policy didn't harm them in the way some critics suggested, it still failed to take levelling up seriously.

Of course, difficult questions arise about how to level up. I don't claim to have the answers. But for argument's sake, we might again consider the case of free admissions to major museums in less advantaged areas. The Ineffectiveness Criticism is less applicable here. What about the Damaging Criticism? Suppose a philanthropist built a major free museum in Manchester but not Birmingham that promoted (a)–(d). Although there would be an inequality, it seems hard to believe they would have done something bad. By contrast, if they invested in excellent school infrastructure in Manchester but not Birmingham, they would be creating inequalities worthy of concern.

My argument can accommodate this intuition. Investments in less advantaged areas can escape the Damaging Criticism since it also works by degree and applies especially to infrastructure centralised in wealthier areas. By contrast, the schools example raises weightier concerns. This owes to the fact that education has more strongly competitive aspects than 'arts and culture' do.

Still, even in less advantaged regions, free admissions have limited power in providing targeted benefits to disadvantaged groups. Free museums can boost attendance, promote opportunities, evoke pride, and become symbols of accessibility. But their power in conferring benefits on disadvantaged groups and reducing unfair inequalities of opportunity seems to derive more from their geographic reach, and practices of outreach and representative programming.

7. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has considered whether a national policy of free admissions is a good way to improve

access to museums in England. At face value, there are good reasons to think it is. Free admissions boost attendance, remove barriers for disadvantaged groups, and can assist in diversifying audiences. They can also signal a commitment to inclusivity.

But as museum practitioners know, free admissions are no panacea. Drawing on resources from political philosophy and attending to spatial inequalities in England, I have argued that there are sometimes fairness-based reasons to charge, especially at major museums in advantaged areas. Doing so could effectively finance regional redistribution and collaborative engagement with underrepresented communities at museums. In other words, I am arguing that most or all of the desired benefits of making museums across the country more accessible could be achieved without the current policy.

This is based on my understanding of Openness as requiring a commitment to less advantaged groups. But it is also based on the finding that free admissions are not crucial to diversifying audiences, and the fact that a national policy of free admissions absorbs significant resources without in itself driving a correction to spatial inequalities or guaranteeing that other access-promoting efforts are in effect.

My criticisms work by degree and don't apply in all cases. In fact, it is the inability of England's nation-wide policy to account for this variability that makes the policy subject to critique. Naturally, these criticisms are also open to empirical challenge or refinement. Nonetheless, I have argued free admissions are (1) ineffective *to the degree that* they consume/forgo resources that could be allocated towards other activities that are presumptively more direct and cost-effective in targeting less advantaged groups (e.g. redistributive measures across regions; targeted programming; participatory outreach; free admission for target groups). I have also argued that under some conditions they may also be (2) damaging, because and *to the degree that* they protect/compound advantages over time.

Free admissions at smaller museums, and at major museums in less advantaged areas, are less subject to the Ineffectiveness Criticism. Charging in these cases may be a major deterrent for local and target audiences, and not consume significant resources. The two criticisms can also come apart. The Damaging Criticism is only activated when a region enjoys a relative concentration of resources. Hence, the Ineffectiveness Criticism may apply to museums in some contexts without the Damaging Criticism also applying, if they are based in a region which is not very advantaged. It is also fully consistent with my argument that the same general policy could be fair in other contexts, for instance in a country that lacked the centralisation of resources that characterises England.

These criticisms could also be tested in contexts beyond museums, such as education. Enough has already been said about the competitive aspects of education to suggest that the Damaging Criticism could apply to comparable strategies of promoting educational goods—such as free

university tuition, or debt-waiving for all social and economic groups. Perhaps the money absorbed by these strategies could more effectively be allocated towards scholarships or targeted debt-waiving for less advantaged citizens (Brighouse and Mullane 2023).¹⁰³ Insofar as free tuition accelerates higher education mainly for advantaged groups, it would also seem to entrench unfair inequalities of opportunity over time, even while attracting praise and being celebrated as an achievement.¹⁰⁴

More generally, my argument highlights the risks of egalitarian thinking that takes the existence of communal infrastructure as an expression of solidaristic or fraternal social relationships, independently of how they are spatially distributed and who mainly uses them. In political philosophy, some discussions of fraternal relationships and the communal infrastructure that supports them emphasise the intrinsic value of that infrastructure, in expressing those relationships (e.g. Anderson 1993, pp. 158–61). This implies that communal infrastructure is valuable as a symbol of fraternity or solidarity independent of its effects on wellbeing (O’Neill 2008, pp. 143–44). However, this can obscure the fact that communal infrastructure is often distributed unfairly. It also risks delaying the important task of identifying the features of that infrastructure that benefit less advantaged groups and how to design or evaluate them accordingly.

In closing, it’s worth considering how free admissions are such a popular policy, despite the criticisms I have raised against them. I think that one of the key reasons for this policy being so popular relates to the “obscuring effect” I’ve alluded to. Intuitively, a policy of free admissions to major museums seems to support, or at least not be inconsistent with, commitments to social and economic equality. Progressives seem, on an instinctive level, to associate free museums with an anti-capitalist mode of consumption that affirms solidarity between citizens. Plausibly, this provides a framing effect for evaluations of the policy.

Now, to be clear, those who benefit the least from a country’s major cultural investments might say that state funding for arts and culture isn’t meant for people like them. In surveys on this area of spending in the UK, lower socioeconomic have reported these attitudes (Bennett et al. 2009, pp. 201–04). However, in suggesting that free admissions obscure unfairness, my focus isn’t on these individuals. I’m referring to those who characteristically benefit from existing arrangements, e.g. educated people living in London, or who are mobile enough to regularly travel there. For these groups, a policy of free admissions seems liable to disarm critical scrutiny: it not only signals solidarity but also supports their quality of life. What I’m suggesting is that many supporters of free museums would sincerely believe them to be an effective use of promoting cultural opportunities for the less advantaged.

¹⁰³ However, if free access to education raises concerns of fairness, then free tutoring sites, free libraries, and Wikipedia would be in trouble. A full application of the criticism would have to account for these examples.

¹⁰⁴ Some of these concerns can be mitigated by progressive taxation, but this cannot fully address the accumulation of advantages among advantaged groups, which also needs to be considered.

Alternatively, we might doubt the intentions behind policies that concentrate resources in advantaged areas, arguing that they are a form of “regulatory capture” (cf. Táiwò 2022, pp. 57–60). On this view, the stability of this policy would partially be the result of dominant groups and institutions exerting pressure on government agencies to sustain the dominance of London. By contrast, my explanation doesn’t rely on clandestine pressure groups or insincere public reasoning. It’s quite possible that there is just a widespread misunderstanding of the causal relationship between making goods free at the point of access and distributing advantages to the less well off. This may lead people to support the UK’s policy of free admissions to major museums without pushing for levelling up: an effect we might refer to as “cognitive capture” (cf. Rilinger 2023). My arguments show us why any normative analysis of freely available goods needs to take geographic and social disadvantage into account.

Appendix

The below tables provide evidence that DCMS funding overwhelmingly benefits London residents. The main finding is illustrated in Table [A2](#).

Table A1. DCMS museums sponsorship (2017–22)

Location	Average £'000	Percent of total
London	186,096	46.25%
Wholly/partly outside London	216,232	53.74%
Total	402,328	

More resources were allocated on average outside of London over the last five years. However, this fails to account for per-capita spending.

Table A2. Estimated per capita DCMS spending in London (2017–22)

	Average spend	Average population 2017–22	Average spend	per-capita
London	£186,096,000	8,898,837	£20.91	
Non-London England	£216,232,000	47,295,035	£4.57	
England	£402,328,000	56,193,872	£7.16	

Calculations combine English population estimates (Table [A3](#)) and DCMS spending data (Table [A4](#)). Londoners received over four times ($20.91/4.57 \approx 4.57$) more money, in terms of money allocated to local DCMS-sponsored institutions, compared with other English residents, 2017–22. Although some resources allocated to London institutions may have been reinvested outside London (e.g. if a London institution sponsored events elsewhere), this should not pose a problem as the figure is conservative. It excludes all resources allocated to London institutions that are partly outside of London: the Imperial War Museum, Tate Galleries, and Natural History Museum (for locations, see Table [A4](#)).

Table A3. Estimated population sizes (2017–22)

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Average
UK	66,040,200	66,436,000	66,796,807	67,081,000	67,026,000	
England	55,619,400	55,977,000	56,286,961	56,550,000	56,536,000	56,193,872
London	8,825,001	8,908,081	8,961,989	9,002,488	8,796,628	8,898,837
England minus London						47,295,035

Population estimates are compiled from ONS (mid-2017, mid-2018, mid-2019, mid-2020, mid-2021). UK population is included as a point of reference. The reason behind average populations is to facilitate quick comparisons of per-capita spending.

Table A4. DCMS sponsored museums spending £'000 (2017–22)

	Institution	Location	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	Average 2017–22	% 2017–22
1	British Museum	London	53,573	52,543	75,709	65,420	66,621	62,773	15.60
2	Geffrye Museum Trust Limited (Museum of the Home)	London	1,696	2,096	2,196	1,889	2,106	1,997	0.50
3	Horniman Public Museum and Public Park Trust	London	4,320	3,820	3,970	4,661	4,619	4,278	1.06
4	Imperial War Museum	Partly outside London	25,497	25,739	22,822	31,658	40,061	29,155	7.25
5	The National Gallery	London	24,092	24,092	24,675	29,257	30,755	26,574	6.61
6	Royal Museums Greenwich	London	16,020	15,870	16,598	19,834	21,744	18,013	4.48
7	National Museums Liverpool	Wholly outside London	19,761	19,761	22,386	25,176	27,206	22,858	5.68
8	National Portrait Gallery	London	7,134	7,634	8,575	9,263	15,645	9,650	2.40
9	Natural History Museum	Partly outside London	41,815	42,455	46,672	60,254	60,667	50,373	12.52
10	Royal Armouries Museum	Mostly outside London	7,788	9,461	7,834	8,430	9,733	8,649	2.15
11	Science Museums Group	Mostly outside London	45,209	47,928	70,542	65,584	70,780	60,009	14.91
12	Sir John Soane's Museum	London	1,012	1,032	1,252	1,381	1,635	1,262	0.31
13	Tate Galleries	Partly outside London	38,066	37,566	41,208	51,570	57,531	45,188	11.23
14	Victoria and Albert Museum	London	37,806	40,676	53,098	79,059	78,268	57,781	14.36
15	Wallace Collection	London	3,711	2,731	3,910	4,091	4,393	3,767	0.94
			327,500	333,404	401,447	457,527	491,764	402,328	

Data are from DCMS annual reports (2017–18, 2018–19, 2019–20, 2020–21, 2021–22). Locations are from Mendoza (2017, p. 28). Figures refer to all grants-in-aid rather than the portion of them given to cover costs owing to free admissions, which is difficult to decipher.

Tables [A5](#) and [A6](#) indicate the monetary significance of DCMS spending (i.e. spending on national museums), as a share of *overall national spending* on museums. This is not intended to be an exhaustive account of funding. It is included to support my claim that money absorbed by free admissions to national museums rivals other sources of funding, from the National Lottery (£33.648 m across 2017–22) or from the Arts Council of England (£67.476 m across 2017–22).

Table A5. National Lottery Heritage Fund museums funding 2017–22 (£ million)

Category	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	Average
Relevant Heritage Areas	35.51	34.48	23.53	6.73	19.35	
Where “museum” is in recipient name	22.99	2.83	14.7	3.99	4.13	
Total	58.5	37.31	38.23	10.72	23.48	33.648

Data are from DC Research and Wavehill (2024, p. 60).

Table A6. Arts Council of England museums funding 2017–22 (£ million)

Category	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	Average
Where museums is discipline (£millions)	26.58	37.98	38.05	38.12	40.3	
Where “museum” is in recipient name	1.61	1.29	1.41	1.09	1.74	
Acceptance in Lieu & Cultural Gifts Scheme	17.4	33.63	40	30.68	27.5	
Total	45.59	72.9	79.46	69.89	69.54	67.476

Data are from DC Research and Wavehill (2024, p. 60).

3. Doing Justice to Cultural Goods

The first chapter of this thesis explored the public justifiability of arts funding, whereas the second chapter examined issues of distributive fairness that arise in its implementation. This chapter examines another fairness-based concern, relating to agency. Justifications for cultural policies, I argue, should respect *cultural agency*: our ability to shape the way we are represented, and to form appropriate convictions of our self-worth. I argue that a recent work on “perfectionist justice” fails to take this consideration into account. Moreover, it falls short of explaining the link between cultural goods and justice because it fails to distinguish between policies that improve and entrench structural disadvantage. Drawing on case studies from Indigenous Australia, I argue that these explanatory gaps can be partially addressed by incorporating respect for cultural agency.

1. Introduction

State support for art and heritage is often divisive. Cultural policies of this kind are criticised for being extravagant, entrenching marginalisation, and favouring particular activities, e.g. artistic appreciation. As we saw in Chapter 1, these criticisms have piqued the interest of political philosophers. In one corner of the literature, we see a group of liberals (Rawls 1999, pp. 291–92, Brighthouse 1995, Quong 2011) challenging the justifiability of cultural policies and another group defending them (Dworkin 1985, Raz 1986). Call this the *Justificatory Inquiry*: Are state cultural policies justified in general? This chapter turns our gaze to another corner of the literature, where we see a range of theorists (e.g. Young 1990, Fraser 2003) considering what role cultural goods, and by extension, cultural policies, can play in redressing injustice.¹⁰⁵ Call this the *Critical Inquiry*: What should states be doing in the cultural sector to confront oppression?

These two inquiries should inform each other, but they rarely do. As a result, it remains unclear how liberal principles of justice might vindicate or preclude specific policy interventions. Theorists engaged in the Critical Inquiry often suggest a particular justification for cultural policies, linked with remedying injustices, but rarely engage with concerns of public justification.¹⁰⁶ Those focused on the Justificatory Inquiry have suggested that cultural policies are consistent with remedying injustice (e.g. Dworkin, Tahzib) or ineffective and arguably

¹⁰⁵ This broad literature includes feminists (e.g. Young 1990, Fraser 2002), liberals (e.g. Kymlicka 1995, Ivison 2020), and decolonial theorists (e.g. Fanon 2005, Said 1979, Spivak 1988, Mills 1997). Cultural oppression has drawn recent attention from analytic philosophy via specific debates about repatriation (e.g. Thompson 2001, Matthes 2017), monuments (e.g. Schulz 2019, Lim 2020, Lai 2022), aesthetic justice (e.g. Fraser 2024, Lopes 2024), and appropriation (e.g. Young 2008, Matthes 2016, Nguyen and Strohl 2019).

¹⁰⁶ Fraser’s work on the politics of recognition identifies cases of “cultural injustice” and suggests policy interventions that are attentive to concerns of public justification. Kymlicka’s work on accommodations for minority cultural practices, e.g. in language and religion, is another exception.

superfluous (e.g. Brighouse, Quong). But authors on both sides of this debate rarely go beyond abstractions and armchair conjectures, when they analyse the relationship between cultural policies and the impacts that matter in liberal theories of justice. Debate seems almost indifferent to the findings of practitioners and scholars in other fields, e.g. about how particular cultural policies have actually achieved (or failed to achieve) the impacts that matter.

As discussed in the introduction, this matters in part because historical developments have made the empirical assumptions that motivate debates about justification contestable. At the time when formative papers were written on the Justificatory Inquiry in the 1980s and 90s, there was a sound assumption that many state-backed cultural institutions were not sincerely aiming to represent the whole public or impart benefits on disadvantaged groups, except by exposing them to “excellent” art (Dworkin 1985, Carroll 1987, Brighouse 1995). The best or only justification for arts and cultural funding of this kind seemed perfectionist: devoted to a particular conception of flourishing. Throughout the twentieth century, real-world cultural policies seemed like a thing that perfectionists could support, but which anti-perfectionist liberals—those who think justifications for state action cannot be based on a particular conception of flourishing—could not. This has had an enduring framing effect on debates between anti-perfectionist and perfectionist liberals (Quong 2011 vs. Tahzib 2022). But much has changed. Over the past fifty years, many state-funded cultural institutions have shifted towards an ethos of critiquing the cultural mainstream and prioritising the inclusion of marginalised voices.¹⁰⁷ Whatever the core liberal argument against cultural policies is nowadays, it needs to take this historical shift into account.

This chapter has two aims. First, as indicated, to remedy this splintered approach to theorising cultural policies by bringing these two inquiries into dialogue. Second, to lay the groundwork for a new theory of cultural justice—based on cultural agency—that vindicates widespread intuitions about which kinds of cultural policies a theory of justice should recommend and exclude, while satisfying the requirements of public justification.

I begin by describing a key insight of work that explores the Critical Inquiry ([Section 2](#)). Cultural goods and practices can represent social groups.¹⁰⁸ Representational processes shape what I call *cultural agency*, which consists of the human capacities for self-formation (the ability to shape and preserve our identity) and self-respect (the ability to affirm our equal standing, and the worth of our projects). A liberal theory of justice should take these capacities seriously.

I then turn back to the Justificatory Inquiry ([Sections 3–4](#)). After providing a recap of the dialectic between anti-perfectionist and perfectionist liberals, I argue that any justice-based rationale for cultural policies has to explain how particular kinds of cultural policies can promote valuable

¹⁰⁷ I am simply arguing that this shift is significant, and that it has increased power to confront oppression, not that it has in each case, or even that the rhetoric of empowerment is usually paired with meaningful action.

¹⁰⁸ For present purposes, a social group is a group of persons with “a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience or way of life, which prompts them to associate with one another” (Young 1990, p. 43).

human capacities without arbitrarily imposing values on people. Recent work on “perfectionist justice” from Collis Tahzib (2022) and Cécile Fabre (2024) gestures in this direction, by arguing that policies in support of art and heritage are based in individual rights to flourish. However, this work fails to vindicate intuitions about cultural agency, by failing to recommend policies that address cultural marginalisation and to exclude those that worsen it.

In [Section 5](#), I examine two cultural policies that have affected Indigenous Australian communities to show how cultural agency can sharpen our intuitions about which cultural policies justice should favour. [Section 6](#) considers an objection, and [Section 7](#) concludes.

2. Representation and Cultural Agency

Cultural goods and practices can represent groups. This idea is familiar in mainstream cultural discourse and central to academic debates e.g. in anthropology, cultural studies, and comparative literature. It has also featured in political philosophy. Authors like Joseph Raz and Charles Taylor emphasise culture’s role in embodying the views and values of particular groups, and Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser explore how cultural goods reproduce oppression. This section builds on the thesis that cultural goods are representational with two goals in mind. First, to draw out a plausible implication: individuals and groups have interests in having a say over the cultural goods which represent them, and in being respectfully represented. Second, to situate these ideas in the recent philosophical literature, by acknowledging (non-exhaustively) some of the authors in analytic political philosophy who have argued in a similar direction.

Cultural goods can represent groups in at least two ways. First, they can *express and portray* beliefs, experiences, and histories linked with particular groups and identities (Raz 1995). Second, they can partly *constitute* a group, because its shared valuing practices can depend on the existence of certain materials and practices (Taylor 2001, pp. 46–47, Langton 1994, pp. 99–100).

Consider the expressive power of cultural goods. The loose genre “Christian art” contains expressions and portrayals of Christian beliefs and rituals through history. The films *Trainspotting* and *Candy* explore the experiences of heroin users. *Clueless* depicts (and partly creates) 1990s American pop culture. Jazz and hip-hop are sometimes referred to as “black music” for the role that black communities play in constructing them, and the role that these genres have played in characterising black identities (Gilroy 1993, Kim 2024). Philosophers have also noted the power of art and heritage sites to not only express something about, but effectively *endorse*, the attitudes of the people they represent. Statues and monuments of colonists and slave-traders (because of their *honouring* function), express inegalitarian attitudes towards the descendants of colonised and enslaved people (Schulz 2019, Lim 2020, Lai 2022).

Cultural materials can also express beliefs more literally. This is seen in Islamic calligraphy, e.g. in the exterior of Qubbat al-Sakhra (Dome of The Rock) in modern-day Jerusalem, where

Quranic inscriptions emphasise tawhid (the oneness of God) and other Islamic teachings. Some of the visual art of the Yolngu peoples of Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory has its origins in bark paintings which articulated and educated the Yolngu in their legal system of Maḍayin law (Gondarra, 2011).¹⁰⁹

Representation can also be constitutive. A landscape or building can be a central component of a culture because a group's practices depend on using it (Harrison 2013). Berlin's club infrastructure, including famed venues like Berghain and Sisyphos, partly constitute its techno sub-cultures. Not only do these venues offer sites for the performance and ongoing construction of a live music culture, but they are a component of it: without clubs, clubbing cannot exist. To take a rather different example: Uluru is not just a visually spectacular, unusual geological structure by any standard, but part of the 'cultural heritage' of its traditional custodians, the Anangu people. For the Anangu it physically represents the movements of mythical ancestral beings which shaped the land. If policies restrict the Anangu's access to the landscape, or the freedom to carry out the "distinctive cultural practices and ways of life" connected with it, they are compromised in their ability to practice, develop and transmit their culture (Iverson 2020, p. 75).

These expressive and constitutive powers are interactive. This owes to the fact that culture is an active process, whereby the meanings, materials, and scripts that groups rely on for their valuing practices and self-understanding are continually evolving. A practice might remain (e.g. prayer throughout Christian history) while its meaning evolves as a function of how it is expressed and portrayed. Prayer was not created by visual artists, but visual art has shaped some of our ways of recognising and experiencing it. Similarly, advertisements for Coca-Cola have not brought the drink's recipe into being, just as Candy and Trainspotting didn't create heroin. But portrayals and expressions shape the way we engage with represented practices e.g. how we interpret and evaluate them. Conversely, cultural goods *can* sometimes spawn new communities, e.g. out of shared appreciation for an artist's work (Riggle 2024). Swifties could not exist without Taylor Swift's music. It can also work the other way around: a pre-existing group can create or adopt an artefact, symbol, or practice, so that it becomes their emblem or self-proclaimed heritage (Nguyen 2019, Matthes 2024).

These processes shape our agency. We have an interest in being able to influence them, so that we can shape who we are and what we become. And even if we aren't actively influencing what happens in museums, galleries, or on television, we have an interest in being respectfully represented. Inaccurate or demeaning depictions can distort our sense of self (Taylor 1994, Young 1990, pp. 59–60). This is made more troubling by the fact that some representations carry an appearance of neutrality that effectively hides their distorting features. As Marcia Langton writes, "[f]ilm and video can make invisible the racist and sexist import of the cultural material they represent" (Langton 1994, p. 104). This happens when cultural goods make demeaning

¹⁰⁹ The educational value of art does not depend on the literal representation of beliefs, but this is a useful contrast to more abstract expressions e.g. jazz.

depictions of social identities seem mundane, failing to also offer countervailing portrayals, e.g. of Indigenous Australians having ordinary experiences, or occupying esteemed positions.

In the world as we know it, groups have unequal agency over these processes.¹¹⁰ Fraser argues that people who are structurally disadvantaged in these respects are likely to suffer “injustices of recognition”. Socially powerless groups, she argues, are often “subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one’s own”, and “rendered invisible” (Fraser 2002, p. 13). Using the term “cultural imperialism”, Young also argues that people in this position often “find themselves defined from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meanings they experience as arising from elsewhere, from those with whom they do not identify and who do not identify with them” (Young 1990, p. 59, cf. Fricker 2007).¹¹¹

Let’s call structural marginalisation from the production of dominant cultural goods and practices *cultural marginalisation*. Cultural marginalisation threatens agency in at least two ways. First, it threatens self-formation, i.e. our ability to shape or preserve our own identity. Second, it threatens our self-respect, i.e. our ability to form appropriate convictions about our equal standing, and the worth of our projects. I am going to take *cultural agency* as a shorthand for these interests. Recent work on heritage ethics affirms the link between heritage and agency. Erich Hatala Matthes writes:

Any identity will involve constituent elements, whether they are practices, objects, or places. Threats to those elements of our identity, or our ability to engage with them in appropriate ways, can in turn threaten our sense of self. And this is ultimately why questions about conservation often matter to us so much. What’s at stake is whether we are able to maintain some aspect of who we are. (Matthes 2024, p. 64)

But cultural representation isn’t just about preserving our identity. It also plays a role in constructing who we become (Taylor 2001, pp. 46–47). Although Matthes’s wider theory of conservation accommodates this, I want to emphasise the link between agency and cultural goods more generally, including artmaking.

My conception of cultural agency also diverges from Matthes’s work in another way. While Matthes stresses the importance of participating in cultural decision-making *processes*, I want to also stress the importance of certain cultural *outcomes*. A purely participatory view would imply that our agency is always enhanced by being included in decision-making, even if we promote inaccurate and disrespectful portrayals of ourselves. The concept of cultural agency should also leave room for “participatory bads”: cases where democratic decisions diverge from outcomes that promote our best interests. Conversely, we can also be empowered without direct

¹¹⁰ This is just to say that members of groups can suffer reduced power over cultural representation as a function of group membership.

¹¹¹ This is echoed in Fricker’s work on hermeneutic injustice (Fricker 2007, p. 168). However, cultural domination/imperialism are not simply epistemic, and so these concepts also come apart.

involvement in decisions, e.g. when people we identify with are included in decisions that affect us, and when we “see ourselves” reflected in public expressions. It’s harder to recognise our own value if we are routinely ignored, demeaned, or inaccurately represented in dominant cultural practices, and if our group lacks involvement (Raz 1995, Fraser 2003, p. 13, Young 1990, pp. 59–60). Respectful representation and involvement can support our agency even if we aren’t the ones making decisions. The takeaway is that representation affects our agency. Theories of justice should account for this by taking cultural agency seriously.

3. Perfectionist Justice

Now turning to the Justificatory Inquiry: Are cultural policies justified in general? A standard way of distinguishing answers to this question is by whether they appeal to human flourishing, or an element of liberal justice like equality of opportunity. The former answers have been called *perfectionist*; the latter *anti-perfectionist*. Recently, a hybrid approach has started to gain traction—perfectionist justice—that combines elements of both. On this view, states have duties to fund art and heritage because human beings have a right to flourish that requires access to certain cultural goods. Ultimately, I will argue that this recent work fails to provide an adequate justification for cultural policies, because it fails to specify a clear link between cultural goods and justice. First, though, we need to learn more about the nature of this inquiry, and why this is a fair way to assess its goals.

The grouping of justifications for cultural policies into perfectionist and anti-perfectionist stems from a debate about the legitimacy of state actions. Given reasonable disagreement about the good life, can states permissibly take a stance on what human flourishing consists of? Perfectionists say yes; anti-perfectionists say no.

An appeal of perfectionism is that it accommodates the intuition that states should promote human flourishing, not just minimally decent lives. Arts and cultural policies are often cited as paradigm “perfectionist policies”. In fact, liberals on either side of this debate have suggested that “no compelling non-perfectionist rationale for arts funding is available” (Tahzib 2022, p. 176, see also Quong 2011). If this is right, only perfectionists can offer a coherent justification for arts funding.

An appeal of anti-perfectionism is its commitment to respecting the free and equal status of citizens. Anti-perfectionists interpret this as requiring that laws and policies are justified on the basis of considerations accessible to all reasonable citizens, or “public reasons”. This rules out appealing to “sectarian” conceptions of human flourishing that deem particular ways of life superior (e.g. artistic or religious ways of life), or indecent (e.g. those involving drug use or sex work). Such judgements, it is argued, fail to respect people’s ability to govern their own lives (Nussbaum 2011, Quong 2011).

Tahzib’s “perfectionist theory of justice” reframes this dialectic by basing state support for cultural goods in a right to flourish, embedded in liberal principles of justice. Because reasonable citizens are expected to agree on the principles of justice, cultural policies are expected to be part of the scope of public reasoning.¹¹² While Fabre doesn’t explicitly frame her account as “perfectionist”, she also bases her arguments for heritage duties in human flourishing. And a core concern in these debates between perfectionists and anti-perfectionists is a fear of elite capture or cultural domination. This concern generates a Neutrality Objection: that most or all forms of perfectionist policies lack a public justification, because they simply impose values of some group on the rest of us under the cover of universal value. This worry is much broader than debates about perfectionism; it is shared by Marxist (e.g. Táiwò 2022), feminist (Young 1990, Fraser 2002), and race and decolonial theorists (e.g. Mills 1997, Fanon 2005; Said 1979). At any rate, it is a concern that Fabre shares. “Claims of universalism”, she stresses, “all too often mask Western-centric value judgements and power-relations which are a legacy of colonial expansion and its concomitant acts of cultural appropriation” (Fabre 2024, p. 44).¹¹³ Fabre’s aim, nevertheless, is “to offer a philosophical account of the view that some goods are universally valuable and part of humankind’s common heritage, and that we have stringent moral duties in respect of that heritage” (Fabre 2024, p. 45). So although she isn’t responding to the Neutrality Objection overtly, she is addressing the central concerns that motivate that objection.

Proponents of perfectionist justice can claim that the Neutrality Objection overgeneralises. It assumes that most or all variations of cultural policies will be sectarian, even if they are inclusive and diverse. Tahzib is explicit in taking this route. He argues that although *many* perfectionist policies will be rightly subject to concerns about disrespect—for instance, those that enforce a particular religion—many others, including many cultural policies, will not.¹¹⁴

Here's the upshot. Perfectionist justice places cultural policies in the realm of justice. Anti-perfectionist liberals already recognise justice as a sound basis for justification. So perfectionist justice appears to disarm the Neutrality Objection by seeming to meet the terms of public justification. But whether perfectionists like Fabre and Tahzib have actually disarmed this objection depends on whether they can explain the link between cultural goods and justice. Is the connection to justice merely asserted without explanation, or do Fabre and Tahzib clarify how cultural policies distribute basic goods?

Before considering this, it’s worth noting two objections perfectionism faces, if only to show why perfectionist justice is worth taking seriously. First, there’s the sectarian objection. If the kind of reasoning that supports the inclusion of cultural policies also applies to policies promoting, say,

¹¹² Alternatively, perfectionists may argue that state are simply permitted to promote human flourishing (see e.g. Rawls 2001, pp. 151–52, Wall 1998).

¹¹³ Similarly, Tahzib is concerned to not advance a theory of flourishing that merely reflects “a specific class outlook” (2022, p. 150–151).

¹¹⁴ Tahzib 2022, pp. 116–18. Fabre does not carry out this wider justificatory task, though Ferracioli and Terlazzo (2014) discuss how the Nussbaumian capabilities approach Fabre adopts can be reconciled with liberal commitments.

spirituality—that a wide range of people endorse *some* conception of spirituality, just as they do *some* conception of artistic excellence—then there is no good reason for not also promoting spiritual excellence (Billingham 2024). Liberals have traditionally been at pains to avoid endorsing these kinds of policies, for a whole variety of reasons. However, as Tahzib argues, a commitment to spiritual excellence would conflict with a wider range of belief systems (e.g. atheism, secular humanism) than would artistic excellence, even though the latter might be in conflict with *some* belief systems (e.g. some kinds of religious iconoclasm) (Tahzib 2024). So perfectionists have resources to distinguish between better and worse perfectionist policy agendas, e.g. by the degree to which they conflict with commonly accepted doctrines.

What about inequality? As discussed in Chapter 2, cultural policies can generate inequalities that contribute to unfair competitions in employment and education. Yet perfectionists need not ignore distributive fairness. On Tahzib’s conception, the pursuit of perfectionist policies only becomes justified once a society has instituted equal basic rights and liberties, and once the requirements of equality of opportunity are met. Perfectionist policies are then meant to be balanced “intuitionistically” against the difference principle (Tahzib 2020, p. 135). So it cannot be a complaint that perfectionist justice justifies unacceptable inequality, given that perfectionists can set equality-based guardrails on the policies they endorse.

Nevertheless, we may raise doubts about the explanatory power of perfectionist justice. A selling point of these views is their ability not only to justify real-world cultural policies but demand them. But in the real world, the conditions of justice aren’t met. Under such conditions, are “perfectionist duties” ever triggered, or are inequality levels too high? Suppose they are triggered. Can current state cultural policies, reflected in arts funding agencies and heritage bodies linked to UNESCO, be understood as discharging them? The worry, here, is not about excluding objectionable *classes* of policies (e.g. religious) but excluding objectionable *sub-classes* of policies (e.g. marginalising cultural policies). To address this, we need a heuristic for assessing which cultural policies promote human flourishing without reproducing cultural marginalisation.

The question of selection

To establish a link between cultural policies and justice, we have to address the question of selection: How is a basic human good, *G*, supported in an effective way by a certain policy, *P*, such that instances of *P* generally advance justice? Any answer will have to specify a human capacity which we take to be good (for something, or itself), and how certain policies contribute to its development or enjoyment, such that instances of *P* are a fitting or necessary means of promoting it. I am here assuming an interest theory of rights. Specifically, I am assuming that a

person X has a right if “some aspect of X’s wellbeing (his interest) is a sufficient reason for holding some other person(s) to be under a duty” (Raz 1986, p. 166).¹¹⁵

Responses to this kind of question are often implicit in public reasoning. We value our physical safety, because a range of basic goods are threatened without it. Housing policies promote safety by protecting people e.g. from dangerous weather. We value the development and exercise of our minds; educational policies promote this by providing opportunities to develop valuable cognitive traits and skills. When we say that public investment in housing or education is urgent or required by justice, we invoke these explanations, which tell us why access to housing and education is required for our wellbeing, and not simply that it is (Swift 2008, p. 365).

The question of selection is especially important where a right or interest is indeterminate, i.e. compatible with multiple forms of state action. Such cases do not specify a fixed set of state actions. By contrast, consider the right to not be tortured. This right is correlated with a duty not to torture; the duties that respect the right against torture are relatively tightly specified (Griffin 2008). But other rights are more open-ended. A right to health, for example, can underwrite claims to a clean environment, preventative and primary care, vaccination, and treatment for advanced illnesses. Health can be promoted through various state actions—e.g. vaccination programs, hospital networks, speed limits, and food and drug regulation—and these may justifiably vary over time, in response to shifting needs and new technologies.

The right to flourish seems particularly indeterminate, given the variation of what flourishing looks like between cultures and over time. Reflecting on this, Munoz-Dardé writes:

[O]ne might mention the manufacture of musical instruments; or the way in which a whole culture has grown up on making and drinking coffee in particular ways in Italy. Again, one might point to the development of artisanal trades such as viniculture and the limited production of particular types of cheese. And ... local traditions of playing and watching sports: be that rugby in Wales, football in Spain, golf in Scotland, or baseball throughout the US and Japan. (Munoz-Dardé 2013, p. 223)

This pluralist view of flourishing does not *in itself* pose a problem for a right to flourish, since many rights have a “dynamic” nature (Raz 1984). We might just say that a right to flourishing can give rise to many different claims, in accordance with whatever counts as flourishing at some time and place, so long as certain moral norms are respected. But if perfectionists want to say that our interest in flourishing *consistently* generates a duty to provide a certain kind of law or policy (at least in all liberal states), they indicate an unusually high degree of convergence for a

¹¹⁵ This formulation presupposes that a person is the kind of thing that can have a right. I have stated this as a sufficient condition because there may be other routes to X’s having a right. We might say, for instance, that X can have a right that isn’t grounded only in X’s wellbeing but also in the ways in which having this right contributes to the public good. For example, Raz argues that our individual interests in freedom of expression are not by themselves weighty enough to impose duties on others. Rather, it is our collective interests in living in a society with freedom of expression that grounds our right to free speech.

dynamic right. Their arguments would suggest either that a detailed answer to the question of selection is available, or that (despite variation) a particular conception of flourishing is universally appropriate.

4. Question of Selection: Answers from Tahzib and Fabre

Suppose we think there is a link between cultural policies and wellbeing. How can we clarify it? One option is to point to an activity that assists us in developing a worthwhile capacity (e.g. imagination, knowledge, creativity), which at least some human beings would struggle to develop without coordinated support.¹¹⁶ Tahzib and Fabre take this route. Both posit a list of activities that help us to exercise and develop worthwhile capacities: Tahzib, the production and appreciation of excellent art; Fabre, the appreciation of “humankind’s common heritage”. What capacities are fostered by these activities? For Tahzib, the answer is all about art. He alludes to the skills and pleasures which constitute “artistically excellent ways of life”. He says

One way in which the enjoyment of artistic excellence can be promoted is through the operation of publicly funded institutions and agencies dedicated to the encouragement of artistic excellence in its various forms—including musical, operatic, theatrical, literary and poetic forms, as well as the many forms of visual art such as painting, sculpture, architecture, ceramics, printmaking and photography. Arts institutions can encourage these forms of artistic expression through grants, awards, prizes and scholarships. (Tahzib 2022, p. 168)

Although Tahzib’s explanation for how arts funding promotes flourishing is undetailed, he is confident that it would be filled in through the “legislative stages” of government, and that a theory of justice need not anticipate those results. However, his explanation excludes much of what our reflective judgements would recommend. By this I mean that Tahzib fails to draw attention to much of what is valuable about contemporary arts funding, and which distinguishes it from its earlier, illiberal formulations. To see this, notice that the policies he highlights target cultural production rather than consumption. He refers to “grants, awards, prizes and scholarships”, but not to ‘consumer-facing’ contributions e.g. of libraries, festivals, theatre venues, museums and galleries. Of course, cultural institutions need cultural professionals. Libraries need writers, festivals need directors, theatres need actors, galleries need artists, etc. But that’s only one part of the story. Very few members of the public take up these roles, and aesthetic life is also about enjoying things we don’t produce e.g. reading books, listening to music, visiting the theatre. Does this pose a problem? Perhaps the link back to consumers is straightforward: If cultural professionals do excellent work, citizens will be exposed to excellent art.

¹¹⁶ This borrows from Bradford’s framework for “perfectionist” theories flourishing. On her view, such theories need (1) a human capacity constitutive of flourishing, (2) an activity that potentiates it, and (3) characteristic “achievements” to indicate how a capacity is successfully exercised (2021, p. 596).

This poses a *prima facie* problem for Tahzib because artistic excellence doesn't seem to be the feature which distinguishes audience-oriented forms of arts funding from those which always privilege the perspective of producers or curators. This point is brought home by historical contrasts. Contemporary museums often aim at representing or speaking to the concerns of historically excluded audiences. The Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) recently ran focus groups to inform its curatorial decisions around how to represent Black histories and cultures. Reflecting on this process, one of their producers wrote,

Cultural institutions today have a responsibility to offer multiple perspectives, to highlight that the 'museum voice' is a subjective one, and to seize this moment to acknowledge uncertainties, root out assumptions, question cultural facts and present personal stories. Here at the V&A we believe that collaborating with communities on our exhibition-making process is key. (Browne 2022)

I am less concerned with evaluating how well this was done than contrasting it with the intentions of the 19th century V&A. Consider these remarks of its first director, Henry Cole:

If you wish to vanquish Drunkenness and the Devil, make God's day of rest elevating and refining to the working man; don't leave him to find his recreation in bed first, and in the public house afterwards [...] open all museums of Science and Art after the hours of Divine service; let the working man get his refreshment there in company with his wife and children, rather than leave him to booze away from them in the Public house and Gin Palace. The Museum will certainly lead him to wisdom and gentleness, and to Heaven, whilst the latter will lead him to brutality and perdition. (Cole 1884, p. 368)

The early V&A's exhibitions didn't aim at representing marginalised audiences except by comparing their tastes and morals to those of the upper classes, with the hope of improving them. We have many reasons to criticise this kind of agenda—e.g. as elitist, classist, and paternalistic. Yet there's no reason to think that its exhibits lacked *aesthetic value*. A perfectionist theory of justice should be able to distinguish morally between these two approaches. But crucially, what separates them isn't artistic excellence. So how, then, can Tahzib's account rule out the early V&A? Perhaps Tahzib would say that the early V&A failed to respect equality of opportunity by only promoting the cultural practices of privileged groups and omitting fair portrayals of disadvantaged groups.¹¹⁷ I would agree. But even if that rules out the perfectionist mission of the early V&A, it still doesn't explain the importance of audience-centred approaches.

The contemporary V&A's approach only rules out certain conceptions of artistic value e.g. those that reject collaboration or see little value in cultural diversity. But their goals aren't purely artistic. If their goals were only artistic, outreach projects could be assessed purely on whether they increased people's ability to recognise, enjoy and produce good art. Perhaps they pursue those goals. But what distinguishes the contemporary approach is that it has transitioned away

¹¹⁷ For a discussion of how arts funding can be justified by appeal to equality of opportunity, see Gingerich (2019).

from teaching people what to think and how to value. It partially surrenders this authority. This development is relevant to justice because it (1) promotes agency over acts of representation for historically excluded groups, and (2) thereby assists museums to become spaces where visitors of different backgrounds encounter autonomous representations of themselves and each other, supporting cross-cultural recognition and understanding. All of this is compatible with artistic excellence. However, any plausible story of the link between arts funding and justice should accommodate these other goals, not as optional add-ons, but as key conditions, and Tahzib's account doesn't do this.

In response, Tahzib might say that his examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive, so it is misplaced to say that his theory "excludes" audience-facing arts funding. However, my point is not that his theory prohibits these policies, but that it fails to explain their moral significance. This becomes a problem for his theory insofar as it aims to explain the moral significance of arts funding in a just society in ways that anti-perfectionists cannot. He writes that: "no compelling non-perfectionist rationale for arts funding is available" (Tahzib 2022, p. 176).

But couldn't these further details simply be worked out at the "legislative or administrative stages" (Tahzib 2022, p. 139), in light of relevant empirical facts, which vary between societies? My criticism is not that Tahzib excludes detailed policy recommendations. It's that even at the level of reflective judgements and moral intuitions, representation and cultural agency are themes that distinguish the relevant subject matter—i.e. arts funding as publicly justifiable and required by justice.¹¹⁸ In short, these omissions are explanatory gaps in his theory of justice.

Fabre's account is more audience-facing. She emphasises the shared value of cultural goods in uniting human beings around common symbols and identities and doesn't prioritise ways of life associated with heritage professionals. Fabre's subject is "humankind's heritage": cultural goods (i) that all human beings inherit from their ancestors and (ii) have reason to value by virtue of being human. She avoids offering a definitive list, but refers to Notre Dame Cathedral in France, the Old Tea Forests of the Jingmai Mountain in China, and the 6th century statues of Buddha in Afghanistan (now destroyed). The idea is that learning about and visiting these sites supports us to develop capabilities constitutive of flourishing. These include "being able to use one's senses, imagination and thoughts" and "to frame and revise a conception of the good life".

As a matter of justice, thus, all human beings have rights against one another to the freedoms and resources which are necessary to and/or constitutive of their having those capabilities [constitutive of human flourishing], compatible with their treating others with equal concern and respect. This includes freedoms and resources as pertain to cultural goods. Those goods provide the context within which we enjoy those capabilities and thus lead a flourishing life; but they also are its constitutive elements. To that extent, we owe it to one another not to

¹¹⁸ Can Tahzib utilise lexically prior principles of justice to select the right kinds of policies? Not without undermining his wider argument. See [Section 6](#).

impede one another's access to and enjoyment of those goods, and more strongly still, to provide one another with the means to do so. (Fabre 2024, p. 71.)

The core claim is that (a) human flourishing depends on the development of certain capacities, and (b) we cannot develop these without “access and enjoyment” of common heritage. Capacities e.g. of imagination, understanding, and autonomy depend

in part on our having some knowledge about what makes us human, how we have evolved, how our distinctive social and cultural practices are shaped as much by what our predecessors have borrowed from other cultures as by what they have discarded, how our supposedly natural environment has in fact been moulded by long-standing population movements and settlements, what feats of creativity and ingenuity our fellow human beings have accomplished, but also what unspeakable crimes they have committed. (Fabre 2024, p. 72)

These links justify certain rights to protection of, knowledge about, and access to, certain cultural goods, laying the basis for three duties: (1) to preserve sites of common heritage, (2) to grant physical access, and (3) to inform the world of them. Fabre therefore draws a more detailed connection between flourishing and cultural policies than Tahzib. However, her claims are too strong. She suggests that without access to world heritage, we can't develop capacities for emotion, imagination, and autonomy. Although her argument contains qualifiers—“to that extent”, “*pro tanto* precautionary duties”—it fails to tell us how these duties function as enabling conditions for flourishing. This is a problem, because there are cases whereby states will entrench structural injustices by observing them.

Take plural heritage. A particular group may have strong ties to a particular landmark, but so might the rest of humanity. Different valuing perspectives (particular vs. universal) can come into conflict in decisions about who gets to manage sites of shared significance (Meskell 2010). The best way to resolve *some* of these cases may be to establish universal access or “co-ownership” rights between competing parties and the rest of humanity. By defaulting to this position, Fabre's universal access duty risks imposing arrangements on structurally disadvantaged groups that I will return to.

Other problems relate to the skewing of world heritage lists towards dominant groups. As Lynn Meskell writes of UNESCO's listings:

Western European nations have the funds and capacity to pay consultants, prepare more professional dossiers, nominate more sites, and send more delegates to meetings to lobby. They deploy their resources and influence to mobilize their cultural wealth, achieving disproportionate representation on the list ... [I]n one year Italy managed to inscribe ten sites ... This is striking, since 166 out of the 193 States Parties to the Convention have inscribed fewer than ten sites in total. (Meskell 2018, p. 79)

If Fabre is right that human flourishing depends on access to common heritage, and we assume that UNESCO's listings track "real" cases of common heritage, geographic inequalities in world heritage access accelerates global inequalities in wellbeing. Overrepresentation of some regions also dilutes awareness of others. If dominant nations are better placed to popularise their own (universally significant) sites, this also skews globally dominant heritage discourses towards Europe, such that sites in other regions are seen through a Eurocentric prism. In these ways, a European state's duty to preserve, establish access and increase awareness of its world heritage sites drives cultural marginalisation.

A selling point for Tahzib's and Fabre's theories is that they can not only justify state support for cultural goods but assign urgency to them. If they are right, citizens are owed access to a range of cultural goods as a matter of justice. But despite the rhetorical force of these arguments, they fail to discriminate between policies that improve or worsen the conditions of disadvantaged groups. They fail to draw a clear link between cultural goods and justice. This lack of clarity has the potential to subvert our aims in understanding cultural justice, by lending an appearance of justice and legitimacy to arrangements that make things worse.

5. Cultural Agency: Case studies from Indigenous Australia

An emphasis on cultural agency can enable liberal theories of justice to accommodate a range of intuitions about what makes cultural policies morally better or worse. Perfectionists might use cultural agency to indicate which policies and institutions are likely to improve or worsen the interests of human beings in flourishing without undermining other principles of justice. However, cultural agency might also be used by anti-perfectionists. So the concept of cultural agency could help carve out a shared set of policy commitments between perfectionists and anti-perfectionists which—insofar as both sides care about agency—different kinds of liberals can unite around. Exactly how cultural agency is best promoted is a contextual and empirical matter, and so these policy commitments would have to remain suitably abstract. To illustrate that cultural agency links cultural goods to justice, and to show how respect for cultural agency is consistent with promoting shared flourishing, I now draw on two case studies from Indigenous Australian communities.¹¹⁹

Papunya Tula

Since British invasion, Indigenous Australians have faced a wide range of oppressive practices from the Australian government. These include dispossessing land, banning languages, forcibly

¹¹⁹ The distinctive political claims of Indigenous Australians are sometimes defended by recourse to self-determination. The interests underpinning this right might sound close to what I described as 'self-formation' in [Section 2](#): the ability to shape and preserve our own identity. I am using the latter term so that cultural agency can be conceived without presupposing a social group with distinctive political goals or interests.

removing Indigenous children, massacre, and the denial of equal political status.¹²⁰ The ongoing effects of this are seen in inequalities in e.g. health, education, and the criminal justice system. But Indigenous Australians have also exercised agency in this context and retained strong links to their culture (Cox 2023, p. 426). They have preserved their languages, maintained and transmitted cultural knowledge, asserted land rights, and fought for political representation. Notably, cultural production has also been an important means by which Indigenous people have exercised agency and solicited recognition (Langton 1994, Langton and Corn 2023, Myers 2002, Myers 2024). State cultural policies have sometimes supported this.¹²¹ Australia's first Indigenous arts centre, Papunya Tula, provides an example.

Papunya lies 240 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. Initially a government-operated settlement for forcibly displaced Indigenous peoples, by the 1970s it housed over a thousand residents, many of whom suffered illness and premature death. Nonetheless, anthropologist Fred Myers recounts: "It was in 1971 at Papunya that a group of Pintupi, Luritja, Arrernte, Anmatyerre, and Warlpiri men began to turn traditional designs involved in ritual and body decoration and cave painting into a new and partly commoditized form—acrylic paintings on flat surfaces" (Myers 2002, p. 2). With support from a local white schoolteacher Geoffrey Bardon, artists would soon organise themselves into a cooperative and coordinate the production and sale of works "to outsiders, using acrylic paint on canvas and wood" (Myers 2002, p. 3). These were the beginnings not only of Papunya Tula Arts, but one of the most recognised art movements in modern Australia, the Western Desert Art movement.

Readers who don't recognise this movement's name are still likely to recognise its images, whose styles and conventions (in particular, intricate dot-painting) have now been incorporated into wider Australian visual culture. The first formal recognition for the Western Desert movement came in 1971, when Kaapa Tjampitjinpa's *Gulgardi* won joint first-prize in a regional art competition. Myers tells of this bringing the painters a sense of "cultural esteem ... coded in cash" (Myers 2002, p. 124). Bardon recalls:

That weekend, over \$1300 cash was raised from the sale of paintings. It was a sensation at Papunya. The Aboriginal men were jubilant. At least five large cash sales were made during the following months, involving some six hundred paintings by twenty-five men. (Bardon 1991, p. 34)

Besides a new-found income stream (this amounts to over \$17,000 in today's money), these events illustrate the power of cultural institutions to provide esteem to groups and communities and not just to individual producers. *Gulgardi* is credited as the first Indigenous work to have

¹²⁰ There is a vast literature on this topic. For recent work on justice and Indigenous Australians in analytic philosophy, see e.g. Ivison (2020), Cox (2023), and Bullot and Enciso (forthcoming).

¹²¹ Examples include funding for community radio (e.g. First Nations Radio), television networks (e.g. National Indigenous Television), and Indigenous galleries (e.g. Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre), and content quotas for radio, television, and streaming services.

been awarded a major prize.¹²² In addition to the willingness of Indigenous painters to share their culture—a point of some controversy among Indigenous people—the early stages of this movement were also driven by occasional sales to tourists, Kaapa’s prize-winning painting, and arts funding. It would take decades before the Australian art market embraced this work. A *particular* kind of arts funding, which centred the agency of Indigenous people, helped make up for the difference. This was a newly created segment of the Australian Council for the Arts, The Aboriginal Arts Board. Consider this 1973 press statement from the office of the then Australian Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam.

The decision to place control for the arts in the hands of Aboriginals is intended to stimulate indigenous Australian arts and lead to the preservation of many art forms almost lost since the settlement of Australia by Europeans. (Australian Government, Office of the Prime Minister, 1973, in Mendelssohn 2013)

The goal of vesting “control for the arts in the hands of Aboriginals”—reflecting Whitlam’s wider policy of self-determination—is morally significant. It granted Indigenous communities a greater degree of agency over the terms of their cultural representation. Even if Papunya Tula had eventually secured institutional support through other channels, this structure gave Indigenous people a chance to shape their cultural influence on the nation. Observers of the Western Desert Painting movement highlight this function.

Acrylic painting, like bark painting and other media forms, is a medium in which dominated people, Indigenous minorities in settler colonial societies, have been able to make themselves visible, valuable, and able to support themselves through their own forms of cultural production. Their portability as objects seen in the spaces of the exhibitionary complex of galleries, museums, and governmental buildings, has been a crucial affordance, bringing visibility to the concerns of people whose presence was previously encountered less directly, through a lens of negativity and through the projects of the dominant society. (Myers 2024, p. 79)

These processes, and their link back to The Aboriginal Arts Board, illustrate how cultural policies can effectively promote agency. They can empower cultural production that solicits recognition and provides a basis for pride which destabilises the cultural forces of structural disadvantage. However, a theory of justice cannot recommend these practices simply by combining artistic excellence with equality of opportunity as Tahzib proposes. Had the Whitlam government instead funded Indigenous scholarships at existing art schools—institutions where Indigenous cultural forms remained marginal—or built branches of such schools in remote areas, it might have improved access. But without shared governance or Indigenous control, such reforms wouldn’t have empowered cultural agency in this way, even if they led to artistically excellent work.

¹²² Prior to the Western Desert movement, other Indigenous artists had achieved a measure of commercial success, notably Albert Namatjira (1902–1959).

These kinds of cases are crucial for understanding the normative dimensions of arts funding. Harry Brighouse has argued that arts funding is a poor tool for responding to structural disadvantages in poor areas, because their causes are mainly economic. Arts centres in poverty-stricken societies fall prey to the Neutrality Objection: they favour the interests and preferences of “those to whom art and the aesthetic are more important” (Brighouse 1995, p. 45). However, this overlooks a key link between culture and justice. If structural injustice is sustained through cultural marginalisation, arts centres can form part of a broader strategy of redress. Their usage of public funds is justified not on the basis of addressing poverty but structural disadvantage, if the target community chooses to pursue them within a budget allocated to culture they autonomously govern. Brighouse is right to say that artists would benefit from this choice. But it is misplaced to see this as arbitrary favouritism. One injustice that Indigenous Australians have faced is the denial of agency over cultural representation, and greater agency in this domain is a vehicle to collective agency.¹²³ This is seen through the role of cultural production in soliciting recognition and pride beyond individual artists.

At this point, though, we might wonder whether my argument is simply pushing Brighouse’s objection back a step. It might be argued that although arts funding plays a role in supporting the self-formation and self-respect of some members of a marginalised group, it isn’t clear how these benefits are distributed to each individual member’s self-respect. Those without interests and talents in art, for example, may not have their sense of self-respect strengthened by greater recognition for the great artists of their group. So perhaps my argument overstates the link between individual recognition and group empowerment, by suggesting that artistic recognition reliably bolsters self-respect for all group members.

In response, I’m not saying that recognition for a group’s cultural output necessarily improves the wellbeing of every member. What I’m saying is that it can make a significant contribution to many of them, and that the benefits are not limited to the producers. Indeed, not every member of the community in Papunya (let alone all Indigenous Australians) might have felt a close association with Western Desert art as it was taking off. Seeing their peers gain recognition as artists might have made them feel happy for them without bolstering their own sense of self-respect. How does this affect my argument? It just refines my point by forcing me to clarify the nature of the contribution that recognition makes to the bases for self-respect that a group shares.

Rawls argues that the basis for our self-respect is something that is affirmed by public acknowledgement of our equal status as citizens (2001, pp. 477–78). What he is referring to, here, is not simply a disposition towards feeling that we are equals, but a rational warrant for feeling this way, in the form of equal rights and liberties embedded in public institutions. It might be argued, in response to Rawls, that not every person is inclined to feel like an equal before the law even if formally they are one. This is often due to injustice. Besides calling for

¹²³ There are cases where the population of a disadvantaged region cannot be referred to as a relatively distinct social group. While these cases are obviously different to those presented by isolated Indigenous communities, they are still present opportunities for democratised cultural budgeting.

injustices to be rectified, Rawls's response would also be that equal rights provide a *warrant* rather than a guarantee for feeling a sense of self-respect.

My point is similar. Our sense of pride and self-respect derives from a range of sources beyond formal political and legal institutions. This includes evidence of our own achievements and abilities, and the way in which we are treated by others. But it can also come in the form of achievements of those whom we identify with, such as our siblings, cousins, friends, or any other group members. When my hometown's football team wins the grand final, this is cause for pride. It can provide a reason for pride in the achievements of my hometown, and what it is capable of, even if I don't feel it myself (Kramer 2017, p. 355).¹²⁴ Part of the basis for our sense of pride, then, includes the achievements of others we associate with.

Nobody wants to say that arts funding can universally establish a sense of self-respect for all members of a marginalised group. That claim is much too strong. What I am arguing is that even if it doesn't provide a *sense of* self-respect for all non-producers (it doesn't), it can still increase a *warrant* for self-respect or pride. It does this by contributing to the pool of publicly acknowledged achievements of people one identifies with. We benefit from belonging to a group whose members are able to (a) develop and exercise their cultural agency, and (b) become recognised for their talents, including their artistic or creative ones. The achievements of others in our group can provide a warrant for believing in our own abilities. This doesn't affect our self-esteem in every case. I may not care about football, or a win may fail to register any wider significance for me, because life is grim.

In order for most or all individuals to feel the benefits of "vicarious pride" (Kramer 2017, p. 355) there may need to be quite a few achievements going around in their group—at least, something above a certain threshold, so that they don't feel like random, isolated events, or the reserve of an elite or extremely talented few. But all this tells us is that structurally marginalised groups deserve a much wider range of opportunities than they usually have. Arts funding has an important place among the wider suite of policies that aim to establish a robust basis for self-respect among members of a group. Its power in promoting recognition and pride is not spoiled by the fact that this benefit doesn't distribute to all members, because no policy appears to function in this way. In order for a liberal theory of justice to recommend arts funding that fosters self-respect, though, it needs to promote cultural agency, not simply artistic excellence. The case of Papunya Tula demonstrates the importance of community-led cultural initiatives, rather than scholarships to mainstream art schools, for doing that.

¹²⁴ Matthew Kramer (2017) develops an argument that national achievements provide a greater warrant for our self-respect. His argument, like mine, relies on the idea that we can feel "vicarious pride", due to achievements that we did not cause ourselves.

Uluru, like Papunya, is located in the Central Desert region, 335 kilometres south-west of Alice Springs. The world heritage listing of Uluru, which provided a right of universal access of the sort Fabre defends, provides an illustration of a cultural policy enforcing cultural marginalisation. Consider this statement from Tony Tjamiwa, a respected elder of the traditional owners of Uluru, the Anangu:

This is Anangu land and we welcome you. Look around and learn so that you can know something about Anangu and understand that Anangu culture is strong and really important. We want our visitors to learn about our place and listen to us Anangu. Now a lot of visitors are only looking at sunset and climbing Uluru. That rock is really important and sacred. You shouldn't climb it! Climbing is not a proper tradition for this place. (Tony Tjamiwa, translated from Pitjantjatjara in Adams 2014, p. 302)

Yet in the decade after Uluru became registered as a world heritage site in 1987, rates of climbing the rock surged from the tens into the hundreds of thousands. The Anangu were powerless to stop this. Although ownership of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park had been nominally returned to the Anangu in 1985, this arrangement required that the land be leased back to the federal government for 99 years, and that climbing rights were preserved for tourists (Adams 2014).

The idea of climbing the sacred statues of a dominant culture (e.g. Buddhas in Thailand or China, or Christ the Redeemer in Rio) seems obviously inappropriate. It might be argued that there is a partial disanalogy between Uluru and man-made sacred sites, as I'll return to. However, the fact that Uluru is a part of nature doesn't take away from the disrespect that climbing Uluru exemplifies. The fact that climbing Uluru was legal until 2019, and generally tolerated and enjoyed, reflects the lack of cultural respect Indigenous peoples often face.¹²⁵ A lack of agency over the conventions governing cultural goods in settler societies is an enabling condition for this. The policy of not climbing the rock is a good policy, from a moral point of view, not simply because Anangu culture has an attachment to the land, but because they are an oppressed group, cultural marginalisation is one of the means by which their oppression has been sustained, and the historical processes whereby cultural marginalisation are reproduced are partially destabilised by restoring their control. It's worth unpacking the role that justice is playing in this reasoning.

¹²⁵ Uluru is located within Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Under Australian law, this area is managed jointly by the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Board of Management, and the Director of National Parks (a statutory office represented by an appointed individual). The decision-making authority of these parties derives from a specific piece of federal legislation, the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (see esp. Sections 376–77). On November 1, 2017, the Board of Management unanimously voted to ban the climbing of Uluru, with effect from October 26, 2019. Because this decision was consistent with the park's management plan, the Director of National Parks was legally required to support it. From October 26, 2019, climbing the rock thus became illegal under Commonwealth law. For a history of legal arrangements governing Uluru up until 2013, and their relation to UNESCO's world heritage categories, see Harrison (2013, pp. 119–39). For a more discussion, and overview of Anangu perspectives, see Whittington and Waterton (2021).

Lea Ypi (2017) provides a useful argument here. To illustrate the role that justice plays in the land claims of many Indigenous groups, she draws an illuminating contrast between Indigenous cultural practices, and the land-dependent practices of the British royal family. Were the royals to lose access to the land surrounding Balmoral Castle, they would also be deprived of a set of hunting practices that have contributed to their subjective flourishing for two centuries. This means that if cultural attachment is necessary and sufficient for a group to have a special claim to govern some piece of land, advocates for Indigenous land rights would also have to grant the royal family a right to governing the lands surrounding Balmoral Castle. But surely the claims of Indigenous groups to their formerly occupied land are of a different, and more decisive, nature. How do we account for this? One way to distinguish claims to land and objects is by reference to the length of time a group has had an attachment to an object or piece of land. But, as Ypi argues, there's a certain degree of moral arbitrariness to who has come to occupy which areas of land throughout history. It seems, then, that the most morally direct way of distinguishing claims is to take background conditions of justice into account. The special claim of the Anangu to the land around Uluru depends on "background conditions" of justice (Ypi 2017, p. 18).

My argument for banning the climb is about restoring the social bases for self-respect among a structurally disadvantaged group. However, as with the case of Papunya Tula, my argument doesn't depend on *all* Anangu people feeling a greater sense of self-respect as a result. By banning the climb, the Australian government just removed one threat to the social bases of self-respect that the Anangu faced. This took the form of laws and practices that disregarded their cultural agency and sustained their position as a socially subordinated group. But some Anangu people may have felt that the change in policy made no difference to their social standing or material conditions. But what I'm arguing is much more modest and plausible. I am just saying that it significantly improved the sources of public affirmation that groups members could draw on as evidence of their equal standing in Australian society. It did this by removing one salient part of a wider arrangement by which the agency of other cultural groups subordinates their own.

However, many climbers of Uluru insisted they were not disrespecting Indigenous Australians and were in fact valuing Uluru by climbing it. The fact that Uluru is a part of nature was a core part of their reasoning. Importantly, this kind of reasoning is not available to those who want to climb or Buddha statues in Thailand, or Jesus the Redeemer in Rio. Some people love to climb rocks and hike through natural landscapes specifically. Other things being equal, this seems like a reasonable pastime. For some people, it is a way of life. Their life plans consist partly in travelling to places that they want to hike over and climb. For this group, natural rock formations count as valuable cultural goods. Presumptively, all groups have a *pro tanto* claim to access the goods their cultural practices depend on. Why, then, should the Anangu's claim to managing Uluru trump that of climbers?

The most natural response is that the rock is sacred to the Anangu. However, from the perspective of neutrality, this response doesn't go very far. After all, some climbers report spiritual connections to nature, that are developed and practiced through the activity of climbing. It might

be argued that although climbing Uluru is disrespectful to Anangu beliefs, it does not entirely prevent them from valuing the rock in their own way. The choice to ban climbing therefore favours one conception of the good over another. How is this justifiable? It is justifiable because, from the perspective of justice, the claims of the Anangu and the climbers are not on equal footing. The disrespect that climbers feel from failing to access the rock does not pose a comparable threat to their equal standing, since climbers are not a structurally oppressed group.¹²⁶ Hence, from the perspective of liberal justice, it is cultural agency *in combination with* structural injustice that generates the weighty claims of the Anangu.

Interestingly, though, the reasoning of these climbers gains an additional form of support from Fabre's presumption that nonexclusive physical access to something is a necessary condition for our universally valuing it. The idea would be that by climbing the rock we are likely to encounter features of it that teach us of our common heritage that we need to know in order to flourish, and that we might otherwise have lacked. While this claim seems implausibly strong, it's worth noting that, on my account, the conditions governing plural heritage sites—and hence, the possible valuing practices—cannot be determined without the input of relevant groups.

This raises a challenge for Fabre's project. The link between cultural goods, flourishing and justice becomes clearer by incorporating cultural agency. However, incorporating cultural agency also undermines the goal of setting out general duties for heritage site management. It is a strange assumption of Fabre's project, though, that learning about and appreciating our common heritage depends on common conditions of heritage site management. Although Fabre does not say that heritage sites must be managed by invariable rules, she comes close to suggesting this by arguing that “we are under [pro tanto] duties of justice ... to grant access to” humankind's heritage (Fabre 2024, p. 78, emphasis in original).¹²⁷ Prioritising the agency of the structurally disadvantaged only poses a problem if we accept this assumption.

I do not endorse the opposing view—that most or all forms of democratised heritage site management will contribute to the human flourishing of all interested parties. But I do want to disarm any scepticism that there is little possibility for convergence between these goals. The case of Uluru illustrates that cultural agency can be respected without depriving interested parties of opportunities to appreciate universally valuable goods.

The Anangu prefer constraints on physical access to Uluru, while welcoming visitors to the surrounding landscape. This prevents some modes of valuing Uluru involving climbing, but

¹²⁶ An empirical argument could also be made. While climbers have a claim to being able to access cultural goods—in this case, natural landscapes—this claim is only marginally limited by restrictions on climbing Uluru specifically. Australia provides no shortage of natural rock formations. By contrast, Uluru is a cultural good that plays a critical role in the spiritual beliefs of the Anangu. I am not relying on this argument, though, since it is possible that a group of climbers could also have developed a strong spiritual attachment to Uluru.

¹²⁷ Fabre says this duty should be balanced against considerations of conservation. However, we can imagine arrangements where this condition is not breached, such as where Indigenous artefacts are made available to dominant groups through major museums that also preserve their integrity.

preserves others: looking at and learning about Uluru, encountering the surrounding “cultural landscape”, listening to the Anangu to learn about their culture. This narrowing of valuing activities thus preserves a range of valuing attitudes. Non-indigenous visitors may still value Uluru for its beauty. They might also respect Uluru for its role in the cultural life of Indigenous Australians. The current arrangement establishes conditions under which non-Indigenous people are better placed to do both. So rather than depriving us of shared opportunities for human flourishing, an arrangement structured by Anangu preferences has contributed to flourishing pluralistically, without undermining justice. By respecting cultural agency, we practice cross-cultural recognition and respect.

6. An Objection

I’ve argued that an ideal of cultural agency assists liberal theories of justice in selecting policies that can remedy cultural marginalisation and avoid those which worsen it. A possible objection, though, is that this overlooks a range of resources that liberals already have at their disposal for promoting justice. Tahzib and Fabre may argue that other elements of their theories of justice—besides a right to flourish, or a “principle of perfection”—allow their views to favour policies that address cultural marginalization over those that worsen it.

To develop this objection, it helps to focus on Tahzib’s theory, where resources are explicitly developed for this purpose. Tahzib’s principle of perfection calls for “social conditions promotive of and conducive to flourishing ways of life ... to be established and maintained” (Tahzib 2022, p. 100), including those relating to artistic excellence and appreciation. However, this is only one part of Tahzib’s conception of justice. And this matters because the principle of perfection is “subordinated to” other lexically prior principles of justice: (1) the equal liberties principle, and (2) the fair equality of opportunity principle.

[O]n the perfectionist [theory] of justice that I am proposing, the provision of an environment that is promotive of and conducive to flourishing ways of life is *conditional* on the other lexically prior principles of justice being met (including, in particular, the principle that each person has the same infeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all). (Tahzib 2022, p. 117)

So why wouldn’t these prior principles preclude policies that worsen cultural marginalisation? Members of a culturally marginalised group are less likely to enjoy equal basic rights (e.g. freedom of expression), and fair equality of opportunity (e.g. in the social bases of self-respect). So cultural marginalisation wouldn’t be tolerated by the equal liberties principle and the fair equality of opportunity principle. In short, Tahzib’s wider theory of justice prevents arts funding from marginalising disadvantaged groups.

However, if this is right, Tahzib's perfectionist principle carries no explanatory power with respect to arts funding. Rather, the things which carry the explanatory load, in selecting policies that protect the relevant interests, are his other principles of justice, which are taken from Rawls and can be characterised as non-perfectionist. This undermines the force of his argument. Tahzib wants to say that "anti-perfectionist liberals need to show that there is a compelling rationale for arts funding from within a recognizably anti-perfectionist liberal framework" but "no compelling non-perfectionist rationale for arts funding is available" (Tahzib 2022, p. 176). But if the equal liberties principle and the fair equality of opportunity principle—rather than the principle of perfection—are what allow a society to generate laws and policies that address cultural marginalisation, then anti-perfectionists *do* have a compelling reason for arts funding. This includes the kind that favours community-led initiatives which empower marginalised groups to develop their own distinctive expressions and to solicit recognition for them.

This counter-objection falls in a slightly different way in respect to Fabre's argument, because she does not explicitly argue that anti-perfectionists lack the resources to explain heritage duties. Still, a similar point applies. Like Tahzib, Fabre might argue that certain capabilities (e.g. human agency) should be given lexical priority over others (e.g. an understanding of our common heritage). This process of prioritisation may allow her theory to recommend arrangements that address cultural marginalisation, and to deter arrangements that inadvertently protect the interests of dominant groups.

However, if it turns out that the ideal arrangements for governing sites of common heritage are rarely or never decided by our interests in appreciating our common heritage, then Fabre's claim that we have stringent duties of justice, in these respects, lacks explanatory and normative force. How can we have stringent duties of justice, in these respects, if they are often or always trumped by other interests and duties? So while Fabre and Tahzib *could* utilise other resources to generate the necessary results, this would involve changing their arguments beyond recognition, and ultimately, undermining their force.

Suppose I'm right about this. What becomes of the explanatory power of cultural agency, as a political ideal? If theorists like Tahzib and Fabre can indeed rely on lexically prior principles of justice to recommend the right kinds of arrangements, then cultural agency *also* seems explanatorily redundant. However, I have not argued that we need to step outside the liberal tradition to develop the concept of cultural agency. I have just argued that the best way of mapping the relationship between basic goods and cultural policies is by looking at concrete cases of injustice. In this respect, what I have done in this chapter is demonstrate the relationship between cultural goods and our capacities for self-formation, and for self-respect. These are goods that liberals already recognise under some description, e.g. via reference to agency or autonomy, and the social basis for self-respect. But while Tahzib and Fabre have gestured towards the capacities that cultural goods might help us to develop, I have drawn a link between cultural production and these basic human goods. This analysis therefore plays a vital role in establishing that cultural policies do, in fact, have a relationship to justice. In addition to clarifying moral

intuitions about cultural injustice, it demonstrates how liberal theories of justice can recommend policies that address cultural marginalization and exclude those that worsen it.

7. Conclusion

In a just society, cultural marginalisation would not exist, or would only exist by autonomous choice, not as a consequence of structural disadvantage. This would only be possible if dominant cultural goods and practices were not marginalising particular identities in an arbitrary, ongoing way. A just society therefore presupposes that social groups are culturally respected: depicted and portrayed fairly and granted influence over the cultural goods that represent them. I have argued that recent work on the justifiability of cultural policies (the *Justificatory Inquiry*) fails to accommodate these intuitions, which arise out of studying the behaviour of cultural goods and practices in sustaining real-world injustices (the *Critical Inquiry*).

In [Section 2](#), I argued that the representational functions of cultural goods affect our identity formation, and that some groups are structurally disadvantaged with respect to influencing these processes. Theories of cultural justice therefore ought to accommodate the significance of cultural agency by preventing cultural marginalisation.

In [Section 3](#), I examined a recent strand of liberal thought—perfectionist justice—which treats human flourishing as a matter of justice and defends presumptive state duties in relation to arts and heritage policies. Perfectionist justice appears to reframe a long-standing debate between anti-perfectionist and perfectionists about the legitimacy of arts and heritage policies. However, the success of this view depends on whether it can explain the link between cultural policies and justice.

[Sections 4–5](#) demonstrated that Tahzib’s and Fabre’s defences of perfectionist justice fail to meet this challenge, because their arguments for perfectionist duties fail to adequately discriminate between policies that improve and worsen cultural marginalisation. But while their attempts to establish duties of justice in respect of cultural goods fall short, an ideal of cultural agency might be used to revise their theories. The explanatory power of cultural agency is well illustrated through two case studies from Indigenous Australia. Papunya Tula Arts illustrates that cultural budgets managed by minority groups can empower forms of cultural production that destabilise the cycles of disadvantage. By contrast, the arrangements governing Uluru show that a lack of agency over cultural policies can in fact reproduce cycles of disadvantage and disrespect.

In [Section 6](#), I considered an objection that Tahzib and Fabre might raise to my argument. They may argue that my analysis fails to consider how lexically prior principles of justice could be used to refine their arguments, allowing them to favour policies that address cultural marginalization over those that worsen it. However, if this is right, then Tahzib’s “principle of perfection” is drained of its explanatory power. Rather, it is his non-perfectionist principles of justice that bear

the weight of explaining how arts funding contributes to a just society. This would undercut his claim that “no compelling non-perfectionist rationale for arts funding is available” (2022 p. 176). Similarly, if Fabre were to accept that her three heritage duties must often give way to prior principles of justice, this would significantly weaken her argument’s force. How could we have stringent duties of justice toward world heritage, if they were often trumped by other duties?

The last fifty years have seen cultural institutions in democratic states take a more concerted approach to increasing agency and representation of historically marginalised groups. An ideal of cultural agency provides a rationale for these efforts. It can be further clarified through the principles of distributive justice such as fair equality of opportunity. There is scope for theories of cultural justice to move in different directions. But in order to do justice to cultural goods, we need to respect cultural agency.

4. The Convergence Thesis

The question of whether and how museums should democratise their work is topical but remains largely unexplored in political philosophy. This chapter develops a novel justification for why heritage organisations should be democratised, that builds on three other areas of the dissertation. First, it illustrates how the ideals of cultural literacy and cultural agency are interrelated. One key reason to democratise museums is to promote cultural agency. However, if this is done in the right way, this also promotes cultural literacy, for which there are collective benefits.

Second, this chapter adds detail to a claim made in Chapter 2: that museums should distribute civic benefits to marginalised groups through collaborative programmes. But what is collaboration, and why is it valuable? I argue that meaningful collaboration involves granting authority to nonexperts, and that it supports cultural agency and disseminates marginalised standpoints. Although this may be done through *institutional partnership* (e.g. when a mainstream museum collaborates with marginalised groups), I argue that its value is limited without also promoting *institutional ownership* (e.g. when community-run archives and museums act as hubs for marginalised groups).

Finally, the chapter addresses a key objection to anti-perfectionist justifications for arts and heritage funding. It might seem that the goals of promoting cultural literacy and agency leave aesthetic value by the wayside. But I argue that, by promoting cultural agency and cultural literacy, museums diversify and enrich the materials we can draw on for understanding culture and history. This contributes to our aesthetic lives by facilitating aesthetic resonance and exploration.

1. Introduction

Should museums open their curatorial and collecting decisions to nonexperts? Although philosophers have critically examined the authority of experts in a range of institutions in democratic societies, discussions have so far neglected institutions like museums, galleries, and heritage sites. Meanwhile, in recent decades, the idea that these institutions should collaborate with their audiences has gained major influence.¹²⁸ There are ways of defending this development

¹²⁸ This is reflected in academic literature and public debate, and in the statements of cultural institutions themselves. For a critical history of participatory projects in the art world, see Bishop (2012). For discussion about how Western museums have gradually shifted their explicit goals from enlightenment and the improvement of manners towards consumer experiences, fair representation and participation, see Bennett (1995), Geuss (2009), and more recently, Pierroux et al. (2020). These developments are also well-documented in heritage studies (see e.g. Harrison 2013).

that simply focus on valuable experiences and the commercial viability of museums.¹²⁹ But given their status as public institutions that manage our material past, museums in liberal democracies are rightly subject to *moral* demands of inclusion. These demands are expressed in criticisms of museums for their historical exclusion of marginalised groups, colonialist collections, biased curatorial practices, and the persistent overrepresentation of upper socioeconomic groups among both audiences and staff. The idea that nonexperts and marginalised groups should have greater input into decisions about what museums collect, preserve and display seems like a natural response to these issues.

However, the demand to democratise museums faces a challenge. Concerns of wrongful exclusion relate not simply to exclusionary *processes*, but also to exclusionary *outcomes*. In order for democratic practices to rectify problematic biases in museum collections and curatorial work, the outcomes of heritage projects would need to be improved (e.g. epistemically, morally, or aesthetically) by including input from diverse individuals, even if they lack expertise in e.g. anthropology, history, or curating. This implies a partially instrumental view: inclusive decision-making is a crucial or effective means of improving epistemic and aesthetic outcomes, and not simply valuable for instantiating fairness. Proponents of this view need to explain why nonexpert judgements reliably trump those of curators and historians when it comes to developing an engaging, diverse and respectful presentation of the past, or otherwise explain why it doesn't matter that they don't.

This chapter has two aims. First, to outline the reasons for democratising museums and the challenges that they face. Second, to defend an instrumental theory of democratisation that meets those challenges. I will understand museums as organisations that deliberately manage a society's material inheritance. Museums are not the only institution that perform this role—others include archives, libraries, and memorials. These organisations can be understood as part of a “heritage commons”: an evolving set of institutions and practices for governing and appraising aspects of the past. Collecting and curating are distinctive ways in which museums manage our material past, so I will treat “democratising museums” as exemplified by nonexpert influence in these areas.¹³⁰

The push to democratise museums is linked with cultural agency. How museums select, organise and present cultural material influences how their audiences understand themselves and each other. Suppose that you are the founder and manager of a restaurant that has made a significant,

¹²⁹ It would be overly simplistic to say that this trend has been driven by a single demand or unified social movement. However, the call to widen participation in cultural institutions is often defended with democratic language (for discussion, see Pierroux et al. 2020). The broad idea is that it is not enough that heritage organisations only try and reach a wider public by removing barriers of opportunity to accessing the cultural materials they steward. They should also be “actively soliciting and responding to [the] ideas, stories, and creative work” of their audiences (Simon 2010, iii). Still, this democratic language often emphasises valuable experiences, rather than a demand for fairness.

¹³⁰ Presumably the decisions that ought to be democratised in museums relate to their distinctive roles, and not to decisions such as what settings the air conditioning should be on, and where the toilets should go. Hence, pointing out the key functions of museums helps to fix the scope of decisions to be democratised.

positive contribution to your community. A museum develops an exhibition on how your restaurant got started and became so popular. The curators don't speak with you while developing the exhibition, and the exhibition omits your account on why you opened the restaurant and why it has been successful. This seems unfair. You deserve to have a say in how this aspect of your life is publicly represented. There is a more general principle lurking here: everybody deserves a fair chance of influencing the ways in which important aspects of their past are represented. Democratising museums is valuable in part because it respects this principle.

At the same time, museums have epistemic and aesthetic commitments. They aim to accurately represent the past, and to present materials in ways that engage their audiences, e.g. by prompting reflection or wonder, social connection or joy. Museums might become more inclusive by soliciting influence from the people whose histories they are representing. But co-curated exhibitions can also be inaccurate or fail to engage audiences, if the included groups lack awareness of history or prefer a false version of events, or they lack aesthetic expertise.

Arguments for democratising museums routinely ignore or downplay these possibilities, by relying on what I refer to as *the Convergence Thesis*: that accuracy and audience engagement are usually promoted, or at least not harmed, by nonexpert input. This is an interesting thesis, because it seems likely that collaborative museum projects would sometimes come with costs to accuracy and audience engagement. This chapter fills this gap in existing arguments for democratising museums by explaining how these goals can come to be jointly realised.

In [Section 2](#), I distinguish non-instrumentalist and instrumentalist justifications for democracy and argue that rationales for democratising museums encounter moral and epistemic objections unless they are instrumentalist. I argue that instrumentalist theories are committed to the Convergence Thesis, and that this requires further defence.

The rest of the chapter defends this thesis in two stages. [Section 3](#) argues that certain forms of inclusive decision-making come to reduce inaccuracies and distortions in the historical record. Drawing on James Clifford's theory of "museums as contact zones", and insights from standpoint epistemology, I argue that collaboration in museums can (a) reduce distortions in the heritage commons and (b) affirm the equality of marginalised groups by incorporating the insights of marginalised standpoints.

[Section 4](#) addresses an objection. If the goal is to affirm the equality of marginalised groups and correct the historical record relating to their history, why prefer collaboration, as opposed to full curatorial control? I distinguish between two institutional models—partnership and ownership—and argue that the ownership model plays a key role in the success of the partnership model. Independent, community-led organisations are important for generating the marginalised standpoints that collaborative museums can disseminate. My argument to democratise museums thus generates a case for independent, community-run cultural institutions alongside collaboration.

[Section 5](#) provides the second stage of defence for the Convergence Thesis. Drawing on Samantha Matherne's (2024) theory of aesthetic resonance and aesthetic exploration, I argue that in addition to promoting inclusion and accuracy, collaborative heritage projects also support historical resonance, and historical exploration.

[Section 6](#) concludes.

2. Why Democratisise Museums?

Democracy can be justified procedurally or instrumentally. My first goal in this section is to use these approaches to justifying democratic institutions to model two different arguments for democratising museums. My second goal is to illustrate that although an instrumentalist argument for democratising museums is more attractive, it relies on the Convergence Thesis. Ultimately, I'll be providing a defence of that thesis. However, my third goal in this section is to run a critique of it. The point of running this critique is not to disparage the thesis, but to show that it is interesting and surprising and that it requires further explanation.

Arguments for democratising an institution typically begin with an observation about its need for power. Many institutions require a certain kind of authority in order to function. A water regulator can't perform its function of regulating water usage without being able to turn off the taps, or penalise people for over-use. This power is ineffective at regulating a common water supply unless it applies to all users and is binding. Because every member of that group must live with such decisions (unless and until they are revised), a question arises as to where an institution derives its *legitimate* authority from. This can be answered in two parts. First, an institution can refer to its legitimate purpose in resolving collective problems, such as managing a town's water supply, electricity, security, traffic or pollution. Second, it can refer to its procedures, saying e.g. that they are fair because they (a) rely on credible expertise and do not arbitrarily exclude particular groups, and/or (b) rely not simply or even necessarily on experts, but also (perhaps solely) on input from the affected public. One reason to include nonexperts is that a lack of credible expertise exists; another is that experts in some domain are drawn mainly from particular groups, causing systematic exclusion (Estlund 2003).

What role do democratic decisions play in making an institution legitimate? On one view, an institution gains legitimacy through democratic decisions simply because these procedures are fair. Call this the *proceduralist view*. Another view is that an institution gains legitimacy not necessarily because its procedures are democratic, but also (or perhaps only) because they are an effective means of resolving the problems it grapples with. Call this the *instrumentalist view*.

On a purely proceduralist view, democratic procedures make outcomes legitimate independently of their contents. So citizens would have a presumptive duty to respect the outcomes of processes

in museums and archives on the basis that they were produced through a fair procedure, even if they offend their sense of justice and the truth. By contrast, on an instrumentalist view, the legitimacy of democratic institutions lies in their ability to produce good outcomes. Citizens would only have a duty to respect the practices and outcomes of museums insofar as they meet certain independent standards, e.g. relating to equality and truth.

However, is it even true that museums have authority in the relevant sense? Arguments for democratisation are usually applied to institutions that issue commands, such as governments and parliaments, or organisations with binding decision-making powers like regulators. By contrast, it isn't obvious that museums issue decisions "that are backed by the coercive, potentially violent, force of the state", i.e. binding decisions (Fung 2011, p. 243).

In response, it's worth noting that museums are sometimes involved in binding decisions. Decisions about what to include or exclude from their collections are binding insofar as they are backed by domestic laws. Claims for repatriation illustrate this point. The arrangement of keeping one half of the Parthenon Marbles at the British Museum runs against the preferences of the Greek government, who argue that the "sculptures were obtained illegally by Lord Elgin ... belong to Greece and ... should be returned to Athens" (Scott 2023). Greek citizens might protest this arrangement as unfair, but they can expect to be arrested for trying to remove the sculptures. But although this reflects a binding decision, it is one that is enforced by the British government, rather than the British Museum. This suggests that resistance to repatriation claims is ultimately enforced through domestic laws, rather than museums themselves. Does this suggest that museums lack authority?

Yes and no. Museums in liberal states lack the coercive power that has traditionally motivated arguments for democracy in democratic theory. However, as Archon Fung writes: "the arbitrary binding decisions of government are only one source of interference with individual choice. Nonbinding decisions made by nongovernmental actors ... may [also] threaten an individual's freedom" (Fung 2011, p. 243).¹³¹ One means through which cultural institutions do this is by disseminating representations of our identity or failing to. When we are consistently the target of inaccurate or disrespectful representations, this threatens our agency by making us vulnerable to misunderstandings and failing to provide us with a secure basis for self-respect.¹³²

¹³¹ This point is often made with respect to workplaces and international charities, because of the way their decisions constrain the choices of people they influence, even if they aren't enforced with the threat of violence. My argument extends this work into museums.

¹³² A failure to adequately respect an aspect of one's identity threatens one's freedom, by posing psychological barriers to recognising its value. A failure to adequately appraise a range of different life options may also restrict our freedom, even if we don't currently occupy the positions that lack public validation, or which are stigmatised. The thought, here, is that a person is not meaningfully free unless they possess a range of life options (Raz 1986). This is a central component of Will Kymlicka's work on cultural justice, who writes that "freedom involves making choices amongst various options, and our societal culture not only provides these options, but also makes them meaningful to us. People make choices about the social practices around them, based on their beliefs about the value of these practices" (Kymlicka 1995, p. 83, see also Raz 1986).

I argue that purely procedural views of democracy are unsuited to museums because they run afoul of commitments to equality and the truth. To see this, we need to examine how these views work. An initial way to motivate them is to appeal to the idea that heritage is an ongoing “discursive” or “dialogical” process. For example, cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes,

[Heritage] is one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory. Just as individuals and families construct their identities in part by ‘storying’ the various random incidents and contingent turning points of their lives into a single, coherent, narrative, so nations construct identities by selectively binding their chosen high points and memorable achievements into an unfolding ‘national story’. (Hall 1999, p. 5, see also Smith 2006, p. 44)

Although Hall is describing national heritage, he is also indicating a more general way of understanding heritage as one of the ways that a collective “constructs for itself a sort of collective memory”.¹³³ This discursive theory of heritage can act as a premise in a procedural justification for democratising museums. We might argue that heritage is a process of shared meaning-making that is made fairer by the inclusion of more voices. If we are committed to fairness, we have *pro tanto* reasons to include the constituency of people whose histories are being represented. Stated this way, the argument makes no mention of procedurally independent standards such as truth. It is “constructivist”: it regards meaning and value as constructed through discourse.

While this kind of argument attracts criticism, it’s worth highlighting its descriptive merits. Discursive theories accommodate the fact that the social meaning of historical events and material artefacts changes over time and across different cultural contexts. The emphasis on discourse also accommodates the sense in which meaning-making is a collective exercise, since dialogue always requires at least two people. These claims also have an interesting upshot: if we aren’t able to participate in the discourses through which our collective history is narrated, we lack access to our own heritage. In the language of contemporary analytic philosophy, heritage is a “participatory good” (Réaume 1988, Killmister 2011, Matthes 2024, Riggle 2024), and participation requires something more than legal access to artefacts and heritage sites—it requires access to joint epistemic activities such as “storying”, “narrating”, “debating”, and “interpreting”.

Critical heritage scholar Rodney Harrison makes the connection between discursive practices and democracy more explicit. He argues not only that heritage is “inherently dialogical”, but that if we accept this, then we must also accept that heritage “must be dialogically democratic” (2013,

¹³³ Although Hall advocates a constructivist view of heritage, he is committed to the existence of at least one historical truth, namely, that marginalised groups, such as Black British communities, have played a significant role in the modern history of Britain. Drawing on a range of examples of this kind, he later argues that “there is [a] demand that the majority, mainstream versions of the Heritage should revise their own self-conceptions and rewrite the margins into the centre, the outside into the inside” (Hall 1999, p. 10).

p. 224).¹³⁴ Heritage practices, Harrison argues, should be open to people from all walks of life, and not just the domain of experts and officials. But discursive arguments for democratising heritage contain a normative gap.

If heritage can only exist through collaborative meaning-making processes, then the claim that “heritage must be dialogically democratic” reads more like a definition than a demand. We already have access to a range of heritage goods, because all agents continually integrate aspects of the past into their meaning-making practices. Any meaningful dialogue involves listening and not just speaking, so any meaningful dialogue is, in the sense of requiring equal participation, democratic.¹³⁵ Hence, we can find heritage value locally, in open conversation with others about the past. When I engage in conversation with you about how to interpret World War II—or even yesterday’s news—we are engaging in dialogue about the past. So why worry about democratising national museums, archives, and heritage agencies, if heritage is readily available to us in conversation?

The case for discursive inclusion seems grounded in the value of *self-formation*. We have a strong interest in participating in the processes through which the past is made (Matthes 2024). This interest is relative to the features of the past that weigh most heavily on our identity. Some of the processes that construct our identity are relatively informal e.g. conversations. But others are more formal—or what critical heritage scholar Laurajane Smith refers to as “official” or “authorised”—in that they have the binding power of the state, or for another reason are able to make a lasting impact on our social environment. These formal processes are a key target of my argument. Our identity is formed partially through informal heritage practices including ordinary conversation about the past. But heritage decisions made by states and mainstream organisations have the power to shape the social contexts in which those conversations take place. They can make e.g. false, racist, and sexist representations seem normal, by conferring an appearance of legitimacy on them. By taking into account (a) our interests in shaping our own identities, and (b) the power of museums to threaten these processes, we see how a discursive approach to democratising museums might work. Heritage institutions lack legitimate authority unless they include meaningful input from living citizens. They can’t even achieve their purpose—promoting access, knowledge, and appreciation of the past for all—without public input.

Even in this updated form, though, discursive views face a moral-epistemological objection. Their commitment to constructivism—specifically, to the idea that meaning and value are constructed

¹³⁴ More specifically, Harrison defines heritage as a set of relationships between a wide range of people, places and things that enable aspects of the past to be relevant in the present, enacted through dialogue. On his view, “heritage is seen as emerging from the relationship between people, objects, places and practices, and that does not distinguish between or prioritise what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘cultural’, but is instead concerned with the various ways in which humans and non-humans are linked by chains of connectivity and work together to keep the past alive in the present for the future” (2013, pp. 4–5). This account is quite unusual because it assigns agency and speech abilities to objects and places, and not simply to humans.

¹³⁵ I note that this description parts tracks from a political conception of democracy. However, it seems to faithfully capture the sense in which, for heritage theorists like Harrison, discourse can be a democratic phenomenon.

through discourse—makes it difficult to account for historical facts, and to rule out inappropriate ways of valuing. Cécile Fabre thus argues:

Realist accounts are more plausible. They render intelligible claims that a community is failing to see as its heritage that which in fact is part of it. They make sense of the thought that some goods are part of our heritage even if we have not discovered them yet ... They also accommodate the intuitively plausible claim that a decision to recognize or reject something as part of our heritage is subject to independent moral evaluation. Constructive accounts struggle on those three fronts. (Fabre 2024, p. 50, see also Lonetree 2006).¹³⁶

Fabre's criticisms of constructivist views are powerfully illustrated through cases of historical denialism.¹³⁷ Focusing on these cases also turns out to be of wider use in developing moral and epistemic arguments for democratising heritage. But what is historical denialism, and why does it raise challenges for discursive views?

Historical denialism is the falsification or distortion of historical records. This is objectionable for epistemic reasons: we have interests in avoiding false and distorting beliefs, as they undermine our capacity for rational agency. We need to be able to reason properly in order to form, revise, and carry out plans—all of this is stymied by practices of denying or ignoring the truth. In this respect, historical falsehoods are bad even if they don't contribute to structural injustices. For example, after the French Revolution, the revolutionary government spread false or exaggerated rumours about large swathes of the aristocracy that it had deposed and executed, including claims that they had conspired with foreign governments. These historical falsehoods were not reinforcing a structural injustice against a disadvantaged group. However, they still seem objectionable, because we can't just make up any old history we like. As rational agents we have some kind of duty to the truth, and this applies to how we speak about and represent the past.

At the same time, historical denialism often has significant effects on the welfare of structurally disadvantaged groups. When the majority of a society denies that a living group has suffered a historical injustice, that group faces significant difficulties in having key aspects of their experiences and histories publicly acknowledged (Fricker 2007). To be clear, all members of such a society live in an environment that disrespects the truth, and in this sense, all of their epistemic interests are harmed. However, this environment affects the interests of the historically oppressed group in a distinctive and profound way, by preventing important dimensions of their lives from being appropriately acknowledged by others. It may also reduce their ability to make sense of

¹³⁶ Amy Lonetree's criticism of curatorial approaches at the National Museum of the American Indian underscores this point: "A postmodernist presentation of Indigenous history does not work. Abstraction isn't a correct choice for a museum hoping to educate a nation with a willful ignorance of its treatment of Indigenous peoples and the policies and practices that led to genocide in the Americas" (2006, pp. 640–41).

¹³⁷ Fabre offers a slightly different characterisation of constructivism than what is found in Hall's writing. She writes: "Something is part of our heritage only if (roughly put) it has come to us from our past and we are somehow connected to it. On constructivist accounts of heritage, something counts as part of our heritage only if, in addition, we recognize it as such. On realist accounts, heritage is what we have inherited from our predecessors, irrespective of whether we recognize this to be the case" (Fabre 2024, p. 49).

experiences relating to that injustice, which are strongly in their interests to “render intelligible” (Fricker 2007, p. 7). These processes function to sustain structural disadvantage, by failing to make historical injustices salient or intelligible to the masses.

Australia’s non-Indigenous population have often ignored evidence that their society was founded through invasion, massacre and oppression. This is poignantly reflected in “the scarcity of public memorials, let alone a national memorial or museum in Australia acknowledging the genocides of the First Peoples” (Andrew, Langton and Neath 2025, p. 180). Denialism comes in various stripes. Some prefer a false narrative of a peaceful settlement; others accept that British invasion was violent but argue that this shouldn’t be a salient feature of prominent historical representations, as this might distort more positive aspects of Australia’s British heritage (Pearson 2014, Langton 2025). If the majority of Australians take either of these views, then the whitewashing of Australia’s history is procedurally democratic.¹³⁸ Intuitively, the fact that most people believe the whitewashed narrative shouldn’t confer any credibility or legitimacy on it. Historical truth isn’t a popularity contest. And yet the democratic proceduralist view in at least some respects turns historical truth into something that’s uncomfortably similar to a popularity contest. As this shows, purely procedural views fail to accord proper respect to equality and the truth. So discursive theories have to incorporate procedurally independent standards. Which ones?

One strategy is to appeal to the substantive values that democratic procedures are meant to express, such as our equal status as persons (Christiano 2008). This would involve blending the value of *self-formation* with the value of *equal respect*. Equality is not just a reason to include everyone in procedures, but a reason to strive for particular outcomes. To be sure, no group can consistently realise their preferences in a democratic institution with a diverse constituency. But failure to get what one wants is not in itself a violation of equality. Democratic marginalisation can be procedurally fair if it protects equality overall and is not the result of ongoing structural marginalisation. By contrast, equality is undermined if some groups are systematically excluded from heritage discourses, and if those discourses fail to affirm their equal standing.

This supports not simply (a) the inclusion of nonexpert voices in heritage decision-making, but (b) the elevation of marginalised and oppressed voices in particular, at least with respect to subject matter that directly represents them. This equality-based view says that democratic institutions have less or no authority if they fail to support the basic conditions that individuals require to

¹³⁸ When this repeatedly happens, democracy contributes to structural injustice through a process that democratic theorists have referred to as the “problem of persistent minorities”. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a persistent minority status in Australian society, taking up just over 3% of its population (Pearson 2014, p. 38). Other examples include Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African individuals in the United Kingdom (estimated 2.5% in 2021) (ONS 2022) and self-identifying Black individuals in America (estimated 14.4% in 2023) (Martinez and Passel 2025). To be clear, even larger minorities can still struggle to politically mobilise, such as the Kanak peoples of New Caledonia (estimated 41.2% in 2019) (ISEE 2020), many of whom have strived for national independence from France. For philosophical examination of these issues, see Christiano (2008, esp. chapter 7).

be treated and regard themselves as equal citizens.¹³⁹ While I am calling this an “equality-based view”, it’s worth noting how (b) affirms the commitment to prioritarianism developed in Chapter 2.

Given their relationship to agency, opportunities to develop and exercise our capacity for self-formation seem to be of general value. We may therefore think that the value of opening museum decision-making to nonexperts lies in increasing opportunities to engage in the processes of self-formation, irrespective of who gets involved. Perhaps we’d all benefit from living in a society in which people participate in heritage decisions, even if wealthier and more educated groups are the main participants.

By contrast, we might think of nonexpert input into heritage decisions as something that should involve a more concerted commitment to fairness. Perhaps we don’t simply want to promote cultural agency, but to foster cultural agency among less advantaged citizens in particular. Much like Chapter 2, my argument for museum collaboration aims to develop this perspective. I argue that there is greater moral value in providing these opportunities to those who have the least agency, and that, other things being equal, this is what we should do. Recent philosophical work on heritage ethics also expresses a commitment to empowering the agency of marginalised groups. For instance, Erich Hatala Matthes writes,

Outsiders whose authority gives them the means and access to engage in preservation work, however well-intentioned, without meaningfully including the participation of insiders to the objects, practices, and places they aim to conserve, double down on their excess of power, and end up making a point of it through this very act of exclusion. In the case of museums whose collections have been built through colonialization, exclusionary conservation practices exemplify the very exercise of power that led to the acquisition of conservation candidates in the first place. (Matthes 2024, p. 140)

Matthes is right to emphasise the moral significance of empowering marginalised groups to make decisions about the goods that represent them. At the same time, he seems to place a lot of confidence in the mere *process* of inclusive decision-making, and this fails to account for ways in which heritage decisions can go badly. We want to prioritise the inclusion of marginalised voices. But we also want to drive at certain outcomes, namely, those which affirm the equal standing of marginalised voices by providing fair and accurate representations of their history. Intuitively, it seems like these things would often converge. There’s something intuitive in the idea that particular groups are well placed to recount their own histories. And who are ‘we’ to say how others should narrate their past, and construct their identity, anyway?

Nevertheless, we should still leave room for the possibility of inclusive and collaborative approaches to heritage harming some of the interests of disadvantaged groups. This can happen

¹³⁹ See Christiano (2008, p. 298) for a discussion of how a “moderate proceduralist” view can address the related problem of persistent minorities.

e.g. because collaborative projects (1) add a sense of legitimacy to non-collaborative and historically obfuscating aspects of an institution (Lonetree 2006, Boast 2011), (2) fail to harness the knowledge and critical awareness of marginalised standpoints through effective curation and communication (Lonetree 2006), (3) solicit engagement from marginalised individuals who have not attained a critical standpoint on their history (Toole 2023), or (4) reinforce oppressive social hierarchies within a marginalised group, by deferring to the perspectives of elite group members, even if their experiences are unrepresentative of the group at large (Táiwò 2022).

I am not saying that these negative outcomes are likely but simply that they are possibilities that normative commitments to democratising heritage have to confront. Many advocates of collaboration seem either (i) optimistic that inclusive procedures will generally converge on good moral and epistemic outcomes, or (ii) dismissive of the possible losses that might result when they don't. They therefore endorse what I call the Convergence Thesis: that accuracy and audience engagement are usually promoted, or at least not harmed, by nonexpert input. This is an interesting and surprising thesis: if we prioritise (ethical) procedures, we can't guarantee that we get the (epistemic or aesthetic) outcomes we want heritage practices to produce. And vice versa. The Convergence Thesis tells us that, on some level, we don't need to worry about those goals coming apart. But given that we can easily foresee them coming apart in principle, an adequate defence of democratising museums requires an explanation of why that divergence is unlikely. The rest of this chapter develops a qualified defence of this thesis, starting with moral and epistemic convergence.

3. Moral and Epistemic Convergence

James Clifford's (1997) influential account of museums as "contact zones" helps explain one part of the Convergence Thesis, specifically, the convergence of moral and epistemic goals. The concept of contact zones comes from literary scholar Louise Pratt (1991) and was originally intended as a useful contrast to the "frontier model" of colonial spaces, which fails to account for the ability of colonised groups exercising agency, and the possibility for intergroup alliances. Borrowing this idea, Clifford describes museums as "specific places of transit, intercultural borders, contexts of struggle and communication between discrepant communities" (p. 213). In calling them contact zones, Clifford presents museums as social spaces where different cultures can and *should* interact. Although open about the possibility of things going badly, Clifford's account includes certain ideal outcomes: group alliances, equality, and mutual understanding. It also explicitly emphasises a set of activities through which these might emerge: dialogue and negotiation vis-à-vis museum collections. I argue that Clifford's account, when paired with standpoint epistemology, can explain how the moral goals of collaboration can converge with the epistemic goals of presenting the past in an accurate way.

First, however, we need to understand what contact zones are. Clifford describes contact zones as spaces that put groups with asymmetrical power relations into ongoing relationships with one

other. This happens e.g. where different cultural groups have a stake in resources contained in a particular space, e.g. certain land or objects. Museums are contact zones, for example, if their collections are culturally significant to marginalised groups but managed by museum staff stemming from a dominant group. To gain special access to an Indigenous collection, for instance, Indigenous groups often have to negotiate with museum staff. But in order to legitimately steward Indigenous collections, museum practitioners also have to rely on the trust and cultural and historical knowledge of Indigenous groups.

Contact zones are formed through unjust histories, such as colonial land occupation and resource extraction. But what happens in contact zones, Clifford argues, is not determined purely by asymmetrical power. Marginalised groups form and pursue their own agendas in contact zones. However, their diminished power makes this difficult. They don't call the shots, and their ability to influence what happens depends not only on overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers to being heard (Pratt 1991), but also the willingness of dominant actors to at least partially cede their authority.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Clifford sees the idea of museums as contact zones helping to substitute "monological", top-down communication with "dialogic exchanges structured, ideally, as non-hierarchical relations of reciprocity" (Bennett 1998, p. 203). He says:

By thinking of their mission as contact work—decentered and traversed by cultural and political negotiations that are out of any imagined community's control—museums may begin to grapple with the real difficulties of dialogue, alliance, inequality, and translation. (Clifford 1997, p. 213)

The operative phrase here is "grapple with". Clifford's suggestion is that museums are best placed to productively struggle with difficulties if they collaborate with the marginalised groups whose histories their collections reflect. His phraseology bundles discursive terms like "dialogue" and "translation" together with moral terms like "inequality" and "alliance", suggesting he sees discursive practices and power dynamics as interlinked. But he is vague about how this works. One of his more concrete claims is that

Until museums do more than consult (often after the curatorial vision is firmly in place), until they bring a wider range of historical experiences and political agendas into the actual planning of exhibits and the control of museum collections, they will be perceived as merely paternalistic by people whose contact history with museums has been one of exclusion and condescension. (Clifford 1997, pp. 207–08)

While this is plausible, it fails to explain *how* dialogue and translation foster more trustworthy and equal relationships. Clifford suggests they might replace "mutual suspicion and miscomprehension" (p. 206) but fails to explain why any particular meeting of museum staff and marginalised groups might achieve this. Nevertheless, he concludes: "[m]y account argues for a democratic politics that *would* challenge the hierarchical valuing of different places of crossing"

¹⁴⁰ Pratt defends this point by stressing the unpredictable nature of communication in contact zones, arguing that speech acts can be interpreted "very differently to people in different positions in the contact zone" (1991, p. 36).

(p. 214, my emphasis). But what is the democratic mechanism by which cultural institutions would promote better outcomes?

To address this, it helps to focus on the role museums play in shaping a society's understanding of its past. Museums often collect and document objects, and curate collections. We might think, therefore, that their role is largely one of dealing with material things. However, in making choices to preserve and publicly present specific artefacts—e.g. war relics, modern paintings, or photographs—they are also providing stimuli for various modes of personal and collective meaning-making. They are thus helping to shape our cognitive environment, by contributing to our resources for understanding the past (Dworkin 1985, p. 225). They are, in this way, contributing to the historical dimensions of cultural literacy. To see how this works, we need to make a few observations about the relationship between common beliefs, social environments, and politics.

Societies can succeed or fail, to various degrees, in the extent to which they accurately remember and critically reflect on their past. To be clear, no society consists of agents who only hold true beliefs. But while every society contains false beliefs, this varies in its seriousness—e.g. in its prevalence, deviation from the truth, and political relevance. At one end of the spectrum, we find popular historical denialism on matters of contemporary political significance. For example, societies in which most people deny that a state-backed atrocity on citizens, committed in living memory, ever took place. In these cases, it isn't simply that most people in this society fail to grasp *elements* of the event—e.g. that it targeted a particular social group, or that it took place on a certain day and at a certain place—but that they outright deny its occurrence.¹⁴¹ These cases involve a highly prevalent denial of a politically relevant truth. This is morally serious because e.g. it functions to sustain a structural injustice.

In milder cases, mainstream denialism might just involve a tendency towards beliefs that contain elements of the truth, while excluding others, without necessarily denying them (e.g. that a certain state-backed massacre took place, but that there isn't evidence that it targeted a particular group). This can vary in its political relevance. If the events in question are set in Ancient Rome, then historical falsehoods (promoted, perhaps, by a faulty national curriculum) are mainly epistemically bad. But if they involve unresolved traumas and injustices, then they are also morally bad, and they pose obstacles to the kinds of things Clifford refers to: trust, intergroup alliances, and equal social relationships.

This indicates a specific way in which heritage institutions can contribute to our cognitive environment. They can help sustain the successes and failures of our collective memory. People's blind spots and knowledge gaps don't occur in isolation from their social and material environment. To be sure, much of what people think about historical events is transmitted through formal education and mass media venues e.g. television and the news. But heritage

¹⁴¹ This might be achieved through long-term omissions in national curricula, destruction of evidence, and censorship of expressions referring to events in question.

institutions like museums, memorials, and archives also play a distinctive and effective role in shaping and maintaining aspects of our cognitive environment, by preserving, documenting, and distributing materials that prompt reflection about the past, and challenge or uphold dominant perspectives. In addition to a wider range of institutions, museums can play a role in improving a society's memory practices, by preserving artefacts and representing historical themes that are morally relevant to the lives of living citizens, but which suffer neglect and inattention in the public sphere. They can, in other words, promote the historical components of cultural literacy, by filling gaps in our resources for recognising and understanding the histories of living citizens.

However, the ability of heritage institutions to reduce distortions and inaccuracies depends on harnessing a certain kind of expertise. Museums cannot deliberately reduce distortions and inaccuracies in the heritage commons without first identifying them. Luckily, some individuals are better placed to notice systematic blind spots and inaccuracies in how their society interprets the past. A conventional way of spelling out this point would point to “formal” expertise, established by training in a particular domain such as history, sociology, or anthropology. My argument instead stresses how people's social positioning can grant them epistemic advantages independent of these traditionally recognised routes. What I am appealing to, here, is the idea of *situated knowledge*, as developed by standpoint epistemologists. This is the idea that one's knowledge of the world is shaped at least in part by “one's social identity and the material conditions of one's life”, because these things “influence the sorts of experiences subjects are likely to have and, in turn, shape and limit what we know” (Toole 2023, p. 411).

Together, these points furnish us with an interesting and neglected case for collaborative heritage institutions. Museums can help to improve our cognitive environment, by placing us in a better position to form accurate beliefs about the past, including those of political relevance. Their distinctive role in this lies in their practices of collecting and curating, which can aim to promote historical understanding by addressing gaps in public representations of the past. To do this effectively, however, museums must recognise these gaps and adopt critical perspectives for filling them. The situated knowledge of marginalised groups makes them well-positioned to assist with this. Collaboration with historically excluded groups is therefore a means by which museums can (1) identify and address blind spots in prevailing historical narratives, and in doing so, (2) foster trust and alliances with marginalised groups, as Clifford argues.

The literature on contact zones has mainly focused on colonial collections. But it's worth noting that my revised conception of museums-as-contact-zones illustrates how Clifford's argument can extend beyond “source communities”—i.e. to cultural groups a collection originated from—to marginalised communities more generally. This owes to the symbolic functions of representation, as discussed in Chapter 3: we can find representation in artefacts even if we weren't involved in their production, and even if the experiences and events they represent did not occur to us specifically. Rather, they might have been produced by someone we identify with, or they might depict events similar to those we've experienced ourselves. In short, the experiences

of marginalised people can place them in an advantaged position to critically interpret historical material.

By way of illustration, The Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft (East Sussex, England) is currently organising an exhibition relating partly to the life and work of the artist and sexual abuser Eric Gill (1882-1940). The museum has been open about the difficulties it faces in commemorating Gill's artistry without concealing his sexual abuse, which has sometimes been downplayed or ignored in representations of his life. To grapple with this, it collaborated with four survivors of sexual abuse to develop the exhibition, which will include Gill's painting *Annunciation* and drawings from his two daughters made throughout the period of their abuse. Gill played an active role in a local Christian church community. Importantly, the co-curators were from a local Methodist church and had experience of sexual abuse in a Christian institution. This gave them a unique vantage point for noticing features of Gill's work with connotations of both religious power and sexual domination. Referring to *Annunciation*, one of the co-curators said: "What I see isn't the Virgin Mary and the Angel Gabriel ... It's a scared little girl in a room where she ought to feel safe, with a terrifying figure looming over her, blocking the exit. [It's] all about power – the power that figure has over that young girl invading her space, threatening her. And that's what Eric Gill was all about" (Almond, quoted in Moorhead 2025).

To be sure, critical perspectives might also be reached *without* the input of marginalised people. Plausibly, though, the point of situated knowledge is not necessarily that others *cannot* attain critical perspectives on historical events, but that certain forms of marginalisation are advantageous for developing them (Haslanger 2021, p. 48, Toole 2023, cf. Bright 2024).¹⁴² Briana Toole's work on standpoint epistemology is clear on this point. "Marginalization", she writes, "may be epistemically advantageous in that it may place one in a position to gather more evidence (evidential superiority) or to develop certain beneficial epistemic virtues and habits (cognitive superiority)" (Toole 2023, p. 410). Toole also argues that although marginalisation provides agents with certain advantages in these respects, one still needs to engage in a form of "training"—in the form of consciousness-raising activities—in order for these to materialise in expertise. Provided that marginalised individuals have had the occasion to productively interpret their experiences with others, they will be well positioned to inform the public on where systemic biases lie in the heritage commons. In doing so, they can place others in a better position to achieve "marginalised standpoints" (Toole 2023, p. 41). I will return to the role of consciousness raising in this process below. For now, the takeaway is that we can accept the epistemic rationale for the inclusion of marginalised voices without committing either to the view that those individuals are *destined* to possess epistemic expertise, or that non-marginalised groups cannot also attain such critical perspectives. A commitment to removing distortions and inaccuracies from the heritage commons thus justifies the systematic inclusion of marginalised standpoints.

¹⁴² Some standpoint epistemologists take a firmer line than this, arguing that marginalised standpoints are more closely tied to marginalised groups. For example, they may argue that marginalised individuals presumptively have knowledge and insights that others lack, and that may not be accessible to outsiders. For discussion, see Bright (2024). I am taking a more modest view, in line with Toole and Haslanger.

Marginalised communities should have special input on the heritage commons because of their ability to recognise distortions and inaccuracies in the historical record – distortions which they're more likely to be sensitised to than others.

4. Partnership vs. Ownership, and Consciousness-Raising

I've argued that collaborative projects in heritage institutions can help reduce distortions and inaccuracies in the heritage commons by incorporating the insights of marginalised standpoints. This shows that we can defend collaborative heritage projects without compromising epistemic standards for historical narration. However, a proper defence of collaboration in heritage institutions also has to grapple with its moral costs. Collaboration might yield notable improvements to the representation of historically marginalised groups in public spaces and still (a) obscure historical injustices, or (b) adopt aesthetics that appeal to popular or elite tastes but which alienate marginalised communities.¹⁴³ Amy Lonetree argues that curatorial projects at the National Museum of the American Indian—even though they engage with Indigenous groups—have utilised postmodern and postcolonial theory at the expense of clearly communicating colonial history.

By producing a museum that features exhibits that only curators or those from the academy engaged in postmodern theory can readily appreciate, have we created a new institution of elitism? ... the museum misses an important opportunity to educate because of its choice to present a blurred abstract message to dispel those stereotypes about Indian history and culture that have long predominated in American culture. (Lonetree 2006, p. 642).

Building a more general critique, Robin Boast argues,

No matter how much museum studies have argued for a pluralistic approach to interpretation and presentation, the intellectual control has largely remained in the hands of the museum. The extension of [this approach] into museums, over the past 30 years, has introduced a regime where the educator and the marketing manager ... control the voices of the museum's presentations for a relatively narrow, selective view of "public" interest. (Boast 2011, p. 58)

These reflections raise an issue for institutional partnership. If its goal is to affirm the equality of marginalised groups and correct the historical record relating to their history, what makes collaboration a justifiable arrangement, as opposed to full curatorial control? One answer is that relevant expertise is located in communities (e.g. curators, archaeologists, conservationists) in which marginalised groups are underrepresented. Curators might contribute "strategies for translation" (Witcomb 2003, p. 93) including aesthetic devices for historically contextualising material. Archaeologists may contribute knowledge of sites and objects (Meskell 2012, pp. 4–5),

¹⁴³ There are also cases where collaboration doesn't actually occur; what transpires is consultation, even if it is referred to as collaboration. I am interested in cases of genuine collaboration that yield *some* benefits.

and conservationists may give practical help towards preserving objects. Second, marginalised individuals don't *necessarily* hold marginalised epistemic standpoints (Toole 2023), and so the role of experts might partly be to critically guide their judgements towards the truth.¹⁴⁴

But marginalised groups will often lack real power in negotiations (Smith 2012, p. 12, Matthes 2024, p. 135). So Boast concludes: "the contact zone [is] an asymmetric space where the periphery comes to win some small, momentary, and strategic advantage, but where the [cultural] center ultimately gains" (2011, p. 66). By incorporating minority cultures into their exhibitions, museums can seem more inclusive, even if they aren't enacting lasting change. Nevertheless, Boast writes, the "movement toward integration of source community and stakeholder voices into the museum ... has become a major justification within the museum community for their ongoing relevance and even right to maintain their vast colonial collections" (p. 60, see also Bishop 2012).¹⁴⁵

In response, Lonetree and Boast call for greater control to be handed to marginalised communities in decisions about how their histories are presented in museums. This sounds entirely reasonable, but it still arguably downplays the full scale of the problem. The heritage commons is far larger than museums. The work of critically constructing memory cultures implicates mass media venues, e.g. popular television, streaming services, and social media platforms. It also implicates smaller-scale institutions, insofar as they play a distinctive and effective role in soliciting contributions from culturally marginalised groups, e.g. community-run archives, libraries, arts centres, and radio stations. These are important observations if we think that the full justification for democratising museums lies not only in promoting inclusive decision-making, but also in promoting knowledge and critical awareness of history. Museums may sometimes be ineffective at the kind of consciousness-raising activities that generate or disseminate marginalised standpoints, compared with these other institutions. If this is right, then the epistemic rationale for democratising museums is properly conceived as part of a wider political project aimed at improving a society's cognitive ecology. Because venues other than major museums may be better equipped to foster the kinds of (informal or nontraditional) epistemic expertise that this requires, the epistemic justification for collaboration in major museums may be less urgent, and relatively ineffective without also investing in other institutions. To see this, and how it builds on Lonetree's and Boast's points, we first need to reflect on what consciousness raising involves.

¹⁴⁴ It might also be argued that the contact zone is about negotiating overlapping histories and competing interpretations. Even if marginalised individuals often have a stronger claim to influence than individuals who aren't systematically marginalised, it's not as though no other people *also* have a claim, including experts. This third reason is only an argument for sharing authority with nonexpert citizens, though, rather than with e.g. museum staff. Clifford lends support to this: "Clearly, there is no easy solution to these problems [of competing claims to determine the meaning, value and use of objects], no formula based on unassailable principle. Neither community "experience" nor curatorial "authority" has an automatic right to the contextualization of collections or to the narration of contact histories. The solution is inevitably contingent and political: a matter of mobilized power, of negotiation, of representation constrained by specific audiences." (1997, p. 208)

¹⁴⁵ "Even if art engages with 'real people', this art is ultimately produced for, and consumed by, a middle-class gallery audience and wealthy collector" (Bishop 2012, p. 37).

Haslanger provides a useful description. “Consciousness raising”, she says, “is a collective activity—done with others—and prompts a paradigm shift in one’s orientation to the world This includes a shift in what facts become accessible, our interpretation of them, and what responses are called for” (Haslanger 2021, p. 44). The main question that I’m interested in, though, is which kinds of venues might be geared toward supporting this activity. Interestingly, when people refer to consciousness raising, they don’t tend to refer to particular *venues*. They instead emphasise features of the activity itself. Toole writes:

Consciousness-raising refers to the practice of coming together in groups, identifying commonalities in experience, and developing a critical perspective on those commonalities. By achieving and acting on a shared understanding of these commonalities, one can unmask the ideological misrepresentations that distort (self and public) understanding of that group. Consciousness-raising succeeds in unmasking these misrepresentations by having participants critically examine the relationship between the social situatedness of members of the group and the experiences those members have in virtue of that situatedness. (Toole 2023, p. 417–18)

There are two things that are implicit here. First, participants must feel supported in raising their perspectives with one another. In order for these kinds of discussions to be successful, groups may need access to semi-exclusive spaces—spaces that cater to their own needs. Second, and relatedly, these spaces need to cater to the needs of marginalised groups in particular. Consciousness raising often seems best supported, therefore, by spaces designated to marginalised communities. Reflecting on this, Haslanger writes that “it is often important to create counter-publics where the subordinated can complain to each other without being “corrected” by members of the dominant group, where they can be heard” (2022, pp. 50–51). It is not as though more privileged people can’t also participate. However, “the process of articulating a claim through consciousness raising typically begins with those directly affected” (Haslanger 2021, p. 48).

What’s the upshot? Museums might devote part of their space to community groups that carry out consciousness raising. However, insofar as they aim to serve a wide constituency, as opposed to disadvantaged groups in particular, they don’t seem like ideal settings for this kind of work. Community-run institutions—specifically those aimed at serving marginalised groups—seem better placed to support the kinds of consciousness-raising activities that allow us to think critically about our history. They may therefore be better placed to generate the kinds of informal epistemic expertise that helps to improve our heritage commons.

To show what I mean, it helps to use a concrete example. The Black Cultural Archives (est. 1981) is a heritage centre whose mission is to “collect, preserve, and celebrate the histories of people of African and Caribbean descent in the UK and to inspire and give strength to individuals, communities, and society” (Black Cultural Archives 2025). It emerged as a grassroots response to the systematic racism, growing “from a community response to the New Cross Massacre (1981), the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984); underachievement of Black children in

British schools, the failings of the Race Relations Act 1976, and the negative impacts of racism against, and a lack of popular recognition of, and representation by people of African and Caribbean descent in the UK” (Black Cultural Archives 2025).

Our founders [determined] that what was needed was a space where members of the community, especially young people, could come and find positive representations of themselves in history and culture. This act of self-help expanded into the creation of what our founders called an ‘archive museum’ that evidenced and painted a more comprehensive picture of Black presence in Britain. (Black Cultural Archives 2025)

The moral significance of an institution with this structure is that it places authority in the hands of a marginalised community to document and represent its own history. Because that history is an aspect of British history, this is also a service to Britain. The Black Cultural Archives makes a distinctive contribution to the heritage commons of Britain by correcting historical omissions of Black communities found in other institutions.

This could also have been done without a community-run organisation. But the distinctive epistemic power of the Black Cultural Archives, in developing conceptual resources for understanding marginalised histories, also derives from this grassroots quality. Consciousness raising is empowered by designated spaces where marginalised people can collaboratively engage in e.g. complaint and interpretation (Haslanger 2021). Institutions like the Black Cultural Archives are well situated to perform this role precisely because of their community links. Mainstream cultural institutions might aspire to also perform this work, but their exclusionary histories, typical audience and staff demographics, geographic positioning, and their status as fully public institutions—spaces catering to all groups, and not mainly to minorities—can inhibit these goals. A museum without black staff might invest thousands of pounds in marketing and outreach to reach black audiences. For an institution that is built out of the relevant community, and geographically positioned near to it, the tasks of outreach are far simpler. It almost warrants an inversion of the term “outreach”, as “inreach”. Rather than having to reach *out* to find members of an underrepresented community, staff at a community-run organisation may only have to reach *in* to the community their organisation intends to represent.

What this indicates is not that mainstream heritage institutions such as major museums cannot or should not engage in collaborative outreach, but that this work is often going to be more difficult.¹⁴⁶ The social conditions which conduce to institutions with exclusionary histories successfully eliminating racist biases from their collections and programs are also, by hypothesis, improved by the existence of institutions like the Black Cultural Archives, since their work is devoted fully to exposing some of these issues. The critical insights from consciousness-raising,

¹⁴⁶ An example of a modern British institution which has created a venue to this end is the BBC, specifically its digital radio station BBC Radio 1Xtra, which is devoted to celebrating Black British culture (Bradley 2013). Music journalist Lloyd Bradley attributes the success of this station to how it was governed, from the start, by members of Black British communities. “A significant part of 1Xtra's contribution to contemporary black music lay in how it walked that line between underground cool and mainstream acceptability” (Bradley 2013, p. 396).

counter-speech, and minority expressions are fostered in semi-independent venues, so the epistemic case for democracy recommends investment in community-run, independent cultural institutions.

But where does this example take us, in terms of theorising museums—or heritage institutions—as contact zones? To be clear, I don't think that the community-run spaces I'm referring to, which deliberately aim to serve marginalised groups, must aim at becoming spaces of cross-cultural encounter and dialogue. What I want to say, actually, is that they promote collective cultural literacy incidentally, i.e. even if this is not strictly their aim. They support the cultural agency of marginalised groups in ways that generate marginalised standpoints, which are forms of epistemic expertise that support a culturally literate society. They can function as community hubs, supporting social relationships that affirm collective identity and help group members to develop pride in their identities that resists subordinating norms they may face in other, more public spaces (cf. Pratt 1991, p. 40).¹⁴⁷ They can therefore foster the social basis on which marginalised groups develop their sense of self-respect and equal standing as citizens. One way in which they do this is by supporting discussions that bring common experiences to mind, critically interpreting them, and fostering new means of understanding them that improve upon dominant epistemic practices.

So my argument does not go so far as to say that community-led organisations have a responsibility to disseminate marginalised standpoints, in the form of improved public resources for cultural literacy. This would depend on their resources and their own preferences, as informed by the dynamics of the wider environment in which they operate. At the same time, my epistemic argument for democratising museums tells us that these organisations play a vital role in cultivating epistemic expertise. Therefore, in addition to justice-based reasons for promoting community heritage organisations for marginalised groups, we also have collective epistemic reasons. They are generative of epistemic expertise that support a society to understand itself.

5. Moral, Epistemic, and Aesthetic Convergence

The primary reasons cited for cultural partnership or ownership—e.g. by Clifford, Matthes, Boast, and Lonetree—are moral reasons. They relate to promoting the agency and equal standing of marginalised groups. Proponents of collaboration in museums have failed to explain how these things are not just morally valuable but won't come with epistemic costs. Drawing on insights from Clifford's work on contact zones and Toole's work on standpoint epistemology, I've now plugged this gap. I've begun to develop an *epistemic case* for democratising heritage institutions

¹⁴⁷ Pratt's initial essay on the notion of "contact zones" lends support to this idea. She argues that "[w]here there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone" (Pratt, 1991 p. 40).

that explains one strand of the Convergence Thesis. I've explained how by prioritising certain processes in museum work, we can promote both moral commitments (agency, equality) and epistemic commitments (accuracy, critical standpoints). But what should be said of aesthetic commitments? The goal of this section is to provide the final stage of defence for the Convergence Thesis, by illustrating how collaborative heritage projects can also promote valuable aesthetic experiences. I argue that meaningful participation in heritage projects can enhance their aesthetic value in at least two ways: (1) by enhancing the *historical resonance* of the heritage commons, and (2) in doing so, supporting *historical exploration* beyond the heritage that may be linked with our own identity (Matherne 2024).

First, it helps to draw attention to the dialectical challenges facing this part of the Convergence Thesis. A debate rages in aesthetics and art criticism about what makes participatory art—artistic works that involve audiences in their own creation—aesthetically valuable (Bishop 2012, Riggle 2024, Song 2025). It is often remarked that Western societies have placed increased emphasis on consumer experiences in recent decades, and that individuals now expect to be able to influence the goods and services they consume. But some have argued that by prioritising collaboration, museums will either relegate aesthetic values to the sidelines or implausibly suggest that all collaborative processes are likely to count as aesthetically valuable.

Art historian Claire Bishop (2012) has developed this criticism through a critical historical analysis of participatory art. She argues that efforts to resist artistic commodification and repair social relationships in capitalist societies have “led to a situation in which socially collaborative practices are all perceived to be equally important *artistic* gestures of resistance” (Bishop 2012, p. 13). Bishop is concerned that this movement fails to leave room for aesthetic value. It is as if, she argues, “*there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art*, because all are equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond” (Bishop 2012, p. 13, my emphasis). These statements reward close attention. Bishop's concern is not that such projects *cannot* have aesthetic value. Her criticism targets a view on which they either (a) *always* have significant aesthetic value, or (b) their failure to have significant aesthetic value does not detract from their value overall. Although she doesn't use the descriptor herself, Bishop is targeting a kind of value-monist view, on which inclusive decision-making is all that matters (cf. Gingerich 2024, p. 1162).¹⁴⁸

I want to defend the aesthetic value of collaboration, but not the view that Bishop attacks. In other words, I reject the view that (a) collaborative projects necessarily have significant aesthetic

¹⁴⁸ Gingerich argues that a theory of democracy should leave room for aesthetic value, and therefore needs to be value-pluralist. “Although we have a pro tanto reason to democratize all our social lives, we might on many occasions undertake projects that limit the extent to which democracy can be achieved compatibly with other important aims. If we form a band and I have a distinctive aesthetic vision for the band that can only be achieved if I exercise outsized influence over how the band operates compared to the other members of the band, we might have good reason to run our band in a less democratic way than we could. ... this is not the best way to run the band from the standpoint of democracy, but the aesthetic value that we are able to achieve through our non-democratic organization might be more important for us to pursue than the values of cultural democracy” (2024, p. 1162).

value just by virtue of being collaborative, and that (b) any failure to have significant aesthetic value cannot detract from their value overall. I will argue that collaborative heritage projects, so long as they affirm the value of marginalised groups, are likely to have *some* aesthetic value, because their success in affirming people's identities is partially aesthetic. However, I argue that when the moral and epistemic aims of democratising heritage converge, it's also likely that projects will promote the significant aesthetic goods of resonance and exploration.

What makes a heritage good aesthetically valuable? I will assume that a heritage good, *H*, is aesthetically valuable if it prompts us to have an experience with a phenomenal character (i.e., a subjective experience) that takes *H* as its focus, and we have reason to value that experience either intrinsically or instrumentally. This is an open-ended definition in two respects. It allows for a wide range of heritage *goods* to have aesthetic value (e.g. objects, exhibitions, archives, inherited cultural traditions), and it accommodates a wide range of valuable heritage *experiences* (e.g. pleasure, wonder, insight, bonding). This is not meant to be a fully worked-out aesthetic theory, but it serves my argumentative purposes.¹⁴⁹ It will allow us to claim that an exhibition or monument has a kind of aesthetic value if it supports valuable aesthetic experiences of the right sort.

What might it mean for a heritage good to have aesthetic value *because* it was collaborative, or in some other way democratic? It would mean that collaboration was a (relevant) feature of the heritage good—e.g. of an exhibition or monument—that afforded a valuable aesthetic experience.¹⁵⁰ By way of example, consider *The Monument Against Fascism* in Hamburg (Nguyen 2019). This monument was initially developed by artists Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, but its design and aesthetic characteristics were formed partly through public participation. In 1979, amid a rise in neo-fascism, the city of Hamburg initiated a public dialogue about how it might construct a monument to oppose fascist ideologies. A design competition followed, resulting in a 12-metre lead column being constructed in a bustling public square. Residents were invited to engrave their names on its surface, to affirm their commitment to remaining vigilant against injustice. As more names were engraved, the monument was lowered into the ground to free up more space for engravings. After seven years, the monument was fully submerged in the ground, with only its top surface remaining, level with the floor. The site still contains a sign that explains the project in seven languages. Part of the text reads,

¹⁴⁹ For other accounts of heritage value, see Fabre (2024, pp. 50–51) and see Matthes (2018) and Korsmeyer (2016) for explicitly “aesthetic” accounts.

¹⁵⁰ Strictly speaking, it should be added that collaboration must be *relevant* to its being a heritage good (cf. Fabre 2024, p. 51), such that it could count as part of its value. In the context of debates about aesthetic value, the point is sometimes made that a great book can have the property of being big and heavy and therefore serve as a doorstop. This is valuable. However, it is not a value that a book possesses in its capacity as a work of art. In the context of a museum or an exhibition, we might consider factors such as where the fire exits are placed, how the toilets were built, and who the catering company is. These choices can alter the characteristics of a museum. However, they are choices that are presumptively irrelevant to a museum's purposes in collecting and curating a material past. Hence, if the outputs of collaboration were in these areas, they couldn't count as relevant for my purposes, even if the public managed to improve them aesthetically.

As more and more names cover this 12 metre-high lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the long run, it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice. (Shalev-Gerz n.d., also in Nguyen 2019, p. 976)

Public dialogue and engravings are participatory elements of this project that have shaped its meaning and value. Reflecting on this case, C. Thi Nguyen argues that “[m]onuments and memorials” can serve “as a sort of physical instantiation” for “group commitments” (Nguyen 2019, p. 978). This is made vivid by the fact that the monument was gradually embedded into the ground as a result of people continually engraving their names. Their participation, that is, led the monument into the floor. This demonstrates that participatory art can have moral, epistemic and aesthetic value. Through democratic participation, citizens of Hamburg affirmed their commitments to equality (moral value), promoted a cognitive environment that rejects historical denialism (epistemic value), by prompting memories and reflections that took the participatory elements of the monument as their focus (aesthetic value).

So The Monument Against Fascism offers an example of aesthetic value being grounded in collaboration. However, this is not the only way that a heritage project can be collaborative. The question I’m mainly interested in is how the Convergence Thesis works for projects that prioritise the involvement of marginalised groups in particular. What are the specific ways in which they enhance the aesthetic value of the heritage commons? One of their relevant aesthetic contributions relates to what I call *historical resonance*. We can understand resonance as “the way in which certain aesthetic items ‘strike a chord’ or ‘hit home’ with us in a way that others do not” (Matherne 2024, p. 127). I want to argue that democratising heritage expands the range of public resources available for resonance, especially among disadvantaged groups. To begin, we need a better handle on resonance itself. Samantha Matherne provides a helpful description.

As I understand it, resonance is not just a matter of enjoying or appreciating something, or even enjoying or appreciating something intensely. Resonance marks aesthetic experiences that involve a kind of individual attunement to an aesthetic item: an attunement that turns on the value the item has for us given who we are as individuals. (Matherne 2024, p. 128, see also Riggle 2015, p. 438–39)

Resonance provides a way of thinking through identity-related experiences of heritage.¹⁵¹ When heritage goods powerfully speak to us as individuals, we feel historical resonance. This has to do with our identity, and the cultural context that has formed it. So, this might be family history, elements of local history, or an album or piece of literature we love.

This is a positive resource, because it affirms our identity (Raz 1995). But the materials we draw on to affirm our identity are also a set of conceptual resources, in that they help us to render

¹⁵¹ It might be argued that all forms of aesthetic resonance have historical dimensions. I have no problem with this view, though I do not discuss it here.

intelligible important aspects of our experience (Fricker 2007). I've already argued that organisations like The Black Cultural Archives are well positioned to run projects and exhibitions that speak to Black British communities. The question, now, though, is how these projects combine aesthetic and epistemic resources to achieve their aims. To consider this, it helps to focus on an account of what it feels like to belong to a community that supports your identity. Paul Gilroy's reflections on the power of music to both affirm and to help construct identity provide an illustration of what I have in mind.

When I was a child and a young man growing up in London, black music provided me with a means to gain proximity to the sources of feeling from which our local conceptions of blackness were assembled. The Caribbean, Africa, Latin America, and above all black America contributed to our lived sense of a racial self. The urban context in which these forms were encountered cemented their stylistic appeal and facilitated their solicitation of our identification. They were important also as a source for the discourses of blackness with which we located our own struggles and experiences. (Gilroy 1993, p. 109)

This reflection occurs within a wider analysis of the role that cultural forms can play in affirming a group's relationship to its history and identity. Gilroy isn't referring to heritage projects in formal organisational contexts like archives, museums, or funding agencies. However, his remarks indicate how the various elements of the Convergence Thesis may apply in these contexts. Collaborative and community-led heritage initiatives can provide "sources of feeling" that affirm our identity. Collections and exhibitions can speak to people not just by being about them, but through their "stylistic appeal". Exactly what is stylistically appealing is going to vary by context but can be taken sociologically to mean "the stuff that appeals to a group at a particular time". What all of this suggests is that social environments which nurture the cultural expressions of marginalised groups (moral value) provide resources for self-formation (epistemic value) while also supporting historical resonance (aesthetic value).

This indicates how community-led institutions, like the Black Cultural Archives, can aim to "speak to" particular audiences, stylistically, without forfeiting any of their epistemic power. These things can be mutually reinforcing. The resources we draw on to understand our experiences are made more powerful if they resonate with us aesthetically. Democratising heritage can therefore promote underrepresented content (e.g. particular events, themes, and perspectives) but also certain aesthetic styles (e.g. musical or visual styles linked with specific groups). In short, democratising heritage expands the range of public resources available for resonance, especially for marginalised communities.

There is also another kind of aesthetic good that democratisation supports, which goes beyond our own identities, and therefore applies to dominant groups even if they aren't the ones gaining influence. This is the good of historical exploration. By this I mean the ability to imaginatively explore a range of events and periods of history. This includes being able to contemplate what it would have been like to live at a certain time and place, and the moral significance of particular

events, including injustices and what they mean today. This can be an aesthetic activity, prompted by engagement with particular heritage goods.

My argument here builds on what Matherne refers to as “aesthetic exploration”. Matherne argues that while resonance plays a core role in our aesthetic lives, any aesthetic theory ought to also make room for another value, which she calls “aesthetic exploration”: “the activity in which we engage with items of aesthetic value that are unfamiliar to us given our personal and local horizons” (2024 p. 130). She goes on: “Something is unfamiliar if it is new to us, qua something that we have not experienced or lack knowledge of” (p. 130). Aesthetic exploration is good for us, Matherne argues, because it allows us to have pleasurable experiences, and to marvel and wonder at different aesthetic objects, even if we don’t resonate with them.

I want to suggest that something holds for heritage. Exploring a range of heritage goods is good for us because it is pleasurable, e.g. because it may bring us joy to encounter beautiful objects, or to discover something new. But it is also epistemically valuable, because it can increase our understanding of history, including its moral significance. Knowledge and understanding of Australia’s history is improved through historical exploration of its colonial past. Australian citizens have a particular interest in this activity, not simply for the sake of gaining greater historical knowledge, but because this endeavour is morally important for addressing the unresolved traumas and injustices of the nation’s First Peoples. The work of cognitively improving the heritage commons, in these respects, is promoted through the involvement of Indigenous Australians, who can lead a process of truth-telling.

However, this process also faces challenges. Just because the heritage commons becomes more populated with materials from marginalised cultures, this doesn’t mean that members of dominant groups will necessarily feel compelled to engage with them. These materials may be ignored, superficially appreciated, or outright dismissed, as occurred at times during the popularisation of Indigenous Australian art, discussed in Chapter 3 (Myers 2002). However, a lack of willingness to engage or acknowledge the aesthetic merits of minority expressions is not evidence of their lack of value, nor a reason against them being promoted. We benefit from living in a society in which we *can* encounter diverse aesthetic materials beyond what resonates with us, even if we don’t feel compelled to engage with them at first.

In one respect, this is simply a rehashing of my argument from Chapter 1, with a particular focus on history. I there argued that cultural literacy provides a basis for arts funding, because artworks contribute to our shared hermeneutic resources. I argued that the benefits of this aren’t limited to artists or those from minority cultures, because we all benefit from living in a society in which we’re better placed to understand ourselves and each other. Given the scope and dialectical context of that inquiry, though, I did not weigh in on debates about aesthetic value. The most I said was that we don’t have to endorse a doctrine like Aesthetic Cognitivism—i.e. that part of the value of art resides in its power to promote knowledge and understanding—to explain the ideal of cultural literacy. This is important, moreover, because it shows why the ideal of cultural literacy

is a suitably *political ideal*, that can be reconciled with a principle of neutrality. My current point, though, is to say that resources for cultural literacy should ideally have aesthetic value under some description, because it is by virtue of this that they become effective hermeneutical resources. Although there may be many ways to promote aesthetic value, I have now demonstrated that the democratisation of cultural institutions is one.

6. Concluding remarks

This chapter has argued that museums should open their collecting and curatorial decisions to nonexperts. Many activists and scholars of heritage and museums have defended this conclusion. However, philosophers have yet to consider how it might be justified, and what exactly it demands. Drawing on debates from democratic theory, social epistemology, and museum studies, I have developed a novel justification for democratising museums and heritage organisations generally. I've argued that marginalised groups should have special input on heritage decisions, grounded in their interests in cultural agency, but also in the fact that this improves the cognitive qualities of the heritage commons, and enhances its aesthetic value for all.

The democratisation of museums presents a wide range of conceptual and ethical questions. These include the nature of a museum's authority (e.g. as binding or nonbinding), the extent of influence that might be handed to members of a nonexpert public (e.g. partnership vs. full control), and the scope of decisions to which democratic demands apply (e.g. collecting, curating). I have drawn on resources from prior chapters to help frame and address these questions.

Importantly, though, I have not addressed all the relevant questions and objections that democratising museums raises. For example, I haven't directly addressed the question of who the relevant constituency includes, except by saying that it includes those most affected by decisions, and that greater weight ought to be given to those who currently have the least cultural agency. Given the colonial origins of its collections, the British Museum's constituency is spread across the globe. By contrast, museums with locally sourced collections might legitimately prioritise local publics. Either way, the boundaries of the relevant constituency would appear to be fluid and evolving, as a function of the different decisions museums take across which items to accession and deaccession, and how to depict the past, and how these affect various groups over time (Fung 2011).

Another question that I have not addressed concerns the relevant *unit of influence*. Some democratic theorists may argue that my rationale for democratising museums stretches the meaning of democracy. My arguments might not seem to be about democracy at all, they may argue, because (a) the relevant unit of influence is not a vote, and/or (b) the unit of influence is

not shared equally between all individuals of the constituency. Rather, the power is being handed to a limited few.

In response, it is first worth noting that while I haven't theorised the relevant unit of influence, it may take the form of a vote in some cases. Should the British Museum retain half of the Parthenon Marbles? This question could be put to the citizens of Greece. However, my argument would also suggest that the value of contributing to heritage decisions lies partially in joint deliberation through which we construct the heritage commons. In this respect, the relevant form of influence is more vague, and consists in being given access to venues in which one's voice is heard, and given a measure of authority over decisions that shape the perception of one's identity. With respect to (b), my response would be that my argument relies on a theory of affected interests that is paired with a prioritarian principle. While other theorists may wish to apply my argumentative resources in different ways, my goal has been to consider how the legitimate moral, epistemic and aesthetic goals of museums could be pursued while prioritising the interests of disadvantaged groups.

In [Section 2](#), I argued that the best way to justify the democratisation of museums was partially instrumental, and that an instrumental account would have to provide a compelling defence of *the Convergence Thesis*. This is the view that accuracy and audience engagement are usually promoted, or at least not harmed, by nonexpert input into museums.

The rest of the chapter defended the Convergence Thesis in two parts. In [Section 3](#), I provided an explanation and defence of *moral and epistemic* convergence. I used Toole's work on marginalised standpoints to develop Clifford's idea of "museums as contact zones". In particular, I argued that collaborative projects in museums can help reduce distortions and inaccuracies in the heritage commons by disseminating the insights of marginalised standpoints.

In [Section 4](#), I considered an objection. If the goal of collaborative museum projects is to affirm the equality of marginalised groups and correct the historical record relating to their histories, what makes collaboration a justifiable arrangement, as opposed to full curatorial control (Lonetree 2006, Boast 2011)? While I am in favour of handing greater control to source communities and marginalised groups, I argued that this response doesn't go far enough. The epistemic rationale for democratising museums, I argued, is properly conceived as part of a wider political project of constructing critical memory cultures. In addition to reforming mainstream cultural institutions, this work requires investment in community-led cultural organisations that are generative of informal epistemic expertise or "marginalised standpoints" (Toole 2023).

In [Section 5](#), I provided the final stage of my account, by arguing that the moral, epistemic and aesthetic reasons to democratise museums may often converge. In addition to (1) promoting cultural agency and affirming the equal standing of citizens, and (2) improving the cognitive dimensions of the heritage commons, democratising museums (3) diversifies and enriches the material available to us for recognising and critically interpreting history. It therefore contributes

to our aesthetic lives by facilitating experiences of resonance, and historical exploration. These benefits may be felt mainly by marginalised groups. However, our shared interests in cultural literacy mean that they are to the benefit of all.

5. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that cultural policies have a central role to play in establishing and sustaining the conditions of a just society. However, we cannot understand this role without investigating the representational and affective nature of cultural goods, and their distinctive roles in sustaining the wrongful disadvantage of marginalised groups. This role is illustrated by studying the behaviour of cultural policies in real-world liberal democracies such as the United Kingdom and Australia. Cultural goods are implicated in the ignorance, inattentiveness, and incomprehension that some social groups suffer as a result of ongoing marginalisation. They are also implicated in unfair distributions of resources, such as where major cultural venues are centralised in wealthy regions. One of the clearest illustrations of the link between culture and justice is a lack of agency over the production and management of the goods that represent us. Far from being marginal to the politics of liberal democracies, cultural goods are therefore central to the politics of recognition, distribution, and participation, and deserve a central place in liberal theories of justice.

I have developed these ideas across four chapters.

In [Chapter 1](#), I argued that diversity-based arts funding contributes to a “culturally literate society” where we are all better placed to understand ourselves and each other. It does this by filling gaps in the cultural materials we have for understanding the histories, experiences, and beliefs of ourselves and others. The main upshot of this chapter is that it provides a partial response to the canonical Rawlsian objection to arts funding, which I have referred to as the Neutrality Objection. This is the view that arts funding cannot be reconciled with a liberal commitment to neutrality, because most or all of its variations cannot be justified without appeal to a sectarian way of life. However, cultural literacy can be conceived as a political ideal—an ideal that is valuable purely in our capacity as citizens of liberal democracies. And because arts funding can advance the ideal of cultural literacy through distributing socio-epistemic benefits across a society over the long-term, it can be justified on the basis of providing a public good.

In [Chapter 2](#), I analysed the public policy of free museums in the United Kingdom to develop and refine a critique of this justification. The shared benefits of a culturally literate society relate to people of different backgrounds gaining an understanding of each other’s culture and experiences. Interestingly, though, some of these benefits could be realised—perhaps even more efficiently—via a policy that mainly promoted cultural literacy for wealthier citizens. Poorer citizens could benefit from living in a society where wealthier citizens had a better understanding of their experiences, beliefs, and histories, even if they were not given much state-backed support to develop an understanding of their own experiences, or those of wealthier citizens. This suggests that the strategy developed in Chapter 1—of combining cultural literacy with a public goods rationale to generate an ongoing case for arts funding—is subject to a legitimate concern

of distributive unfairness, because some methods of promoting cultural literacy will compound inequalities of opportunity.

The UK's policy of promoting free entry to major museums provides a fascinating and neglected case study for exploring this issue. While egalitarian on its face, I argue that in practice, this policy has sustained unfair regional disadvantages that violate egalitarian and prioritarian commitments. Given that the distribution of major museums massively favours London, and the fact that museum audiences are largely upper socioeconomic groups, the choice to make museums free at the point of entry sustains positional advantages for wealthier groups. One theoretical upshot of this chapter is that policies aimed at providing civically valuable public goods need to take spatial distribution into account or otherwise fall prey to concerns of distributive injustice. Unless the provision of public goods is regulated by distributive fairness, the solidaristic value of those goods is threatened. Instead of placing citizens into reciprocal relations of recognition and respect, cultural literacy can become an achievement that separates regions and groups on class lines. The practical upshot of this critique is that it would be better to charge entry fees at the most popular major museums in London and redirect that income towards levelling up initiatives. These conclusions challenge an influential strand of egalitarian thinking, which takes the mere existence of public goods to be an important expression of solidaristic relationships. This idea has found a recent defence in the work of Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit (2023), who defend free admission to museums on the grounds of relational equality.

In [Chapter 3](#), I took a more zoomed-out look at debates about cultural policies in liberal political philosophy. I identified a new strand of liberal political thought—perfectionist justice—which appears to provide both a rationale for cultural policies and to assign urgency to them. However, I argued that perfectionist justice, as developed and defended by Tahzib and Fabre, fails to achieve either of these roles. This shortcoming can be traced to the fact that liberal political philosophers have often focused on the question of *whether* cultural policies are justified in general, rather than *how* they might be implemented in a manner that advances the aims of social justice. At face value, we might think that the first kind of inquiry (the *justificatory* inquiry) is separate from the second kind (the *critical* inquiry). However, by neglecting the insights of critical inquiries into cultural policies, justificatory inquiries have failed to distinguish between policies that address structural injustice and those that make it worse. This is not simply a problem for working out how an ideal theory might be applied in real-world liberal states. It is also a problem for explaining the role that cultural goods and practices would play in creating the conditions of justice in an ideal world. In order to explain the link between cultural goods and justice, we need to study the behaviour of cultural goods and policies in the real world. The primary insight of this inquiry is that liberal theories of justice should accommodate an ideal of *cultural agency*.

[Chapter 4](#) applied the concept of cultural agency to the question of whether we should democratise museums. The idea that museums should collaborate with their audiences has gained major influence in recent decades. There are ways of defending this development that

simply focus on valuable experiences and the commercial viability of museums. However, given their status as public institutions that manage our material past, museums in liberal democracies are rightly subject to moral demands of inclusion. How are we to understand such demands? And how might they be in tension with the commitments of heritage organisations? I argued that common explanations for museum collaboration rely on an interesting and surprising thesis, namely, that inclusive decision-making in museums is likely to promote, or at least not harm, accuracy and aesthetic value. Drawing on democratic theory, standpoint epistemology, aesthetics, and museum studies, I developed an epistemic theory of democratising museums that demonstrated how this may work. I argued that marginalised communities should have special input into the heritage commons because of their ability to recognise distortions and inaccuracies in the historical record. This process can (a) foster cultural agency among disadvantaged groups, (b) reduce inaccuracies and distortions in the heritage commons, and (c) expand and enrich our collective resources for understanding and appreciating history, in ways that support resonance and exploration.

Together, these chapters demonstrate that three themes are central to understanding the ethics of cultural policies in liberal states. First, concerns for diversity, recognition and representation underscore the significance of *content*. Second, concerns about fairness in the distribution of advantages between regions and groups highlight the importance of *distributions*. Finally, concerns of participation illustrate the crucial role of *agency*. While not exhaustive, these are themes that any comprehensive normative analysis of cultural justice ought to address. Across the four chapters, I have developed a range of tools for thinking about these issues. The political ideals of cultural literacy and cultural agency have been developed and refined in connection to concrete cases. Their status as *political ideals* means that they can be incorporated into both anti-perfectionist and perfectionist theories of justice. Overall, the work of this dissertation is valuable not only to inquiries into the nature of cultural justice in an ideal world, but also to inquiries into the ethics of real-world cultural policies. Moreover, beyond the study of arts and heritage funding, the concepts of cultural literacy and cultural agency provide new tools for theorising cultural justice.

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