

# NEUTRALITY, CULTURAL LITERACY, AND ARTS FUNDING

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Despite the widespread presence of public arts funding in liberal societies, some liberals find it unjustified. According to the Neutrality Objection, arts funding preferences some ways of life. One way to motivate this challenge is to say that a public goods-styled justification, although it could relieve arts funding of these worries of partiality, cannot be argued for coherently or is, in the end, too susceptible to impressions of partiality. I argue that diversity-based arts funding can overcome this challenge, because it invests in non-excludable infrastructure that fosters cultural literacy. We all have some interest as citizens in living in a society which fosters cultural literacy, seeing as this helps others to understand us, supports us to understand ourselves, and helps alleviate confusion and alienation we feel toward social difference. 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 we all use to make sense of the world.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> The institutions funded under these measures have

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1. 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 accessible to the public in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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

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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.<sup>2</sup> They suggest that arts funding is unjustified because it favours 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.<sup>3</sup>

One concern behind some instances of the Neutrality Objection, for example, 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> But even if the inclusivity ideals behind this shift were to

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mechanisms for supporting the arts have also evolved during this period, e.g., copyright laws and cultural heritage rights.

2. 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. 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.

3. Various defenders of liberal neutrality, like Carroll (1987), Brighouse (1995), and Barry (2002: 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: 4, 89–91) as opposed to a policy favoured by perfectionists.

4. E.g., consider the following from Rawls (1999: 291–92): "principles of justice do not permit subsidizing . . . opera and the theatre, 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". In later work (e.g., 2001: 151–52) Rawls is more sympathetic to perfectionistic defences of public arts funding.

5. Throsby (2010: 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 & Mahal 2012).

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, for example, 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 paper 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-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 §2 I outline a version of the Neutrality Objection based on a Neutrality of Aim principle. In §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 §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 are based on a mistaken view about the relation between individually ben-

eficial 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 §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—the 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 the principle of neutrality 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 par-

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6. Reasonable pluralism refers to the "profound and irreconcilable differences" between citizens' different moral, religious and philosophical ideals (Rawls 2001: 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 (2001: 153 fn. 27).

ticular 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 conception of the good (what are sometimes referred to as *public reasons*).<sup>7</sup> 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, for example, 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.<sup>8</sup> 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, think that neutrality ought to regulate all political activity, including “everyday

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7. By “public reasons” I mean considerations that are 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).

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

democratic decisions” about where and when to build a park or school (2011: 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 (2011: 43). The kind of Neutrality Objection I am interested in answering in this paper presupposes broad neutrality, such that if only Perfectionist reasons can sincerely motivate defences of arts funding, then it’s unjustified.<sup>9</sup>

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 2015).<sup>10</sup> 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: 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: 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: 42, 256). Importantly, this does not rule out the fact that citizens and public officials can have a range of reasons to

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9. 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.

10. 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: 41) and Tahzib (2018: 529–30).

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.<sup>11</sup>

While there are many ways in which sincerity could be assessed, for the purposes of this paper, 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, for example, 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.<sup>12</sup>

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: 224; Brighthouse 1995: 47). Or consider art that is constitutive of our civic infrastructure, like the designs of stamps and public buildings (Carroll 1987: 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.

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

12. This sub-condition could also be read as a “Neutrality of Means” requirement.

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: 222–26; Raz 1986: 198–99; Kramer 2015: 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: 4). Clean air is non-rivalrous because, by breathing it, I don't reduce my neighbour's ability to breathe it (2015: 4–5). 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 (2015: 4). For reasons of scope, I will be focussed on the *non-excludability* criterion of public goods in this paper.

Public goods can create free-rider problems, which is part of what justifies the state's role in helping secure them (Dworkin 1985; Rawls 1999: 236; Quong 2011: 88–89; Kramer 2015: 4). Everyone may have an interest in some pollution-reduction technology. But if no one can be excluded from the good this technology promotes, for example, 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-rivalrous 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, for example, 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*.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one way to establish the neutrality of arts funding, for political liberals, is to argue that it is required by justice, for example, that there is a basic right to culture that a reasonable citizenry would recognise as non-Perfectionist, and that arts funding answers to, or that arts funding is justified on grounds of fair equality of opportunity.<sup>15</sup>

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. Brighthouse, 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: 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” (1995: 45; see also Carroll: 30; Tahzib 2022: 179–80; cf. Munoz-Dardé 2013).

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13. I thank a reviewer and an Area Editor for pressing me to disambiguate these senses of ‘public’, and to clarify the connection between public goods and neutrality. A further sense of ‘public’, that I don’t discuss here, relates to public ownership.

14. 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.

15. 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 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” (1985: 233).

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: 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: 250).<sup>16</sup>

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 proposed something similar in his "exchange branch" of government.<sup>17</sup> 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: 89; Pamuk 2019: 7). If, on the other hand, there are ways to restrict public access to goods political liberals tend to classify as discretionary—for example, by charging some people to enter 'public' parks unless they have, at an earlier time, paid to support 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

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16. 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: 250).

17. Rawls has been criticised for the practical 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: 260; Pamuk 2019: 7; Tahzib 2022: 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 in this paper is to provide an in-principle justification; in this section, it's only to highlight the intuitive plausibility of Scanlon's claim.

promoting democratic or cultural literacy for all citizens, then their aspirations would seem contradicted by a scheme of intentionally unequal, tiered access.<sup>18</sup>

It is the combination of the intuition that (a) arts funding doesn't seem to be required by justice and is therefore discretionary, and (b) 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 Brighthouse 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 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 Brighthouse 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 motivating a Neutrality Objection. However, it entails a key claim about the nature of arts funding that applies to all public goods justifications, Perfectionist or otherwise.

The broader context is that Quong objects to policies associated with Perfectionism because they question the rationality of citizens/their ability to run their own lives.<sup>19</sup> However, he argues that taxation for the provision of a Perfectionist public good—a non-excludable good valued for intrinsic reasons—may not have this quality.<sup>20</sup>

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18. 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.

19. 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: 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 (2011: 85). While he considers neutral rationales for policies associated with Perfectionism beyond his scope (2011: 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. I thank a reviewer and Area Editor for pressing me to clarify Quong's charge.

20. Quong discusses a very 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 focussed on his comments on arts funding.

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. (2011: 89)

Quong is conceding that the existence of a free-rider problem could dissolve the worries of paternalism he attaches to Perfectionist policies. If this is right, then a public good-styled justification for arts funding (even if it rested on Perfectionist grounds) may be acceptable to Quong, if it attracts enough democratic support. 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: 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.<sup>21</sup> If this is right, then a public goods rationale for arts funding can’t work even if it rests of suitably neutral reasons.

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 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.<sup>22</sup> For example, the good of having cleaner air is promotable through activities

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21. Tahzib (2022: 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 (§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.

22. Kramer (2015) makes a similar point in connection to some Perfectionist public goods.

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, for example, 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> (Brighouse 1995: 43)

Manifest Neutrality combines Neutrality of Aim with the following constraint.

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. (1995: 41)

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

24. 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.

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

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" (1995: 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. (1995: 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.<sup>26</sup> 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" (1995: 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, for example, by them joining in policy debates, in a reasonably informed and transparent way.<sup>27</sup>

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

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26. 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.

27. 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: 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.

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 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 Brighouse 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 Brighouse's suggestion, a transformative precondition for people's political participation.

The more fundamental problem with Brighouse'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, for example, 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: 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, for example, 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' justifica-

tions 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. Brighthouse 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. (Brighthouse 1995: 56–57)

We can grant Brighthouse’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, Brighthouse’s manifestness objection is unconvincing.



## 5. The Culturally Literate Society

Quong's and Brighthouse'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 Brighthouse'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, for example in education and tourism (§5.1–5.2), (2) that such programs can be sincerely defended by appeal to cultural literacy understood as a neutral ideal (§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 (§5.4).

This sort of rationale for arts funding resembles one advanced by Dworkin (1985).<sup>28</sup> 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 (1985: 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 (1985: 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

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28. 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: 199). But Raz understands the goodness of these features in Perfectionist terms and doesn't explain their relation to specific government policies.

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: 181–82).

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. 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.

### 5.1. *Hermeneutical Resources for 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, that is, 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 expressions 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 hermeneutic 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 hermeneutic resources. The specific role that I am focussed 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, that is, 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: 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: 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 (Hebdidge 2002). Textile patterns and graphic design elements can also reflect certain regions and cultural histories, as can relatively abstract painting methods, for example, 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, for example, when impoverishment interferes with attaining basic levels of education and cultural awareness.<sup>29</sup>

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29. I am grateful to two reviewers and an Area Editor for encouraging me to develop this part of my argument, and to one such reviewer for suggesting these useful points of comparison.

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 subset 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, are 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 (Kieran 2004; Gaut 2007) more directly and consistently than other areas of education. 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: 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 fulfill 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, that is, 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.<sup>30</sup> 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 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.<sup>31</sup>

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,

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30. As Medina (2013: 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.

31. 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 1994; Gutmann 2003). My contribution to these discussions is just to say that arts funding is a distinctively effective means of fostering this sort of recognition.

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 the 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.

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.<sup>32</sup>

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.

### 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: 202–3). 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 prohibited.

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 fulfill our basic democratic duties, or should not be competitive for positions

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32. 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.

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—for example 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: 198; Tahzib 2022: 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.<sup>33</sup> 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

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33. I thank a reviewer for raising this point.

democracies is tenuous. 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.<sup>34</sup> 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: 56). In the case of arts funding, evaluative standards can be deployed in a comparable manner, to help fill gaps in public resources for cultural literacy, on the basis of how we might expect certain artistic projects to help promote cultural literacy in some way or another.<sup>35</sup>

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34. 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.

35. A reviewer asks 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.

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, can't have more benefits than costs from suspicions of partiality (§4.2). But by placing arts funding in the company of other policies which make distinctive contributions to valuable, 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 (§5), I have also neutralised Quong's excludability objection. Quong is right that not everybody directly consumes the goods that arts funding promotes (§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.

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