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Replies to My Critics

Reply to Alcoff, Clough, Janack, and Mills

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I am very grateful for the thoughtful and illuminating comments of Linda Alcoff, Sharyn Clough, Marianne Janack, and Charles Mills on my *Hypatia* paper. Together, they raise several related questions about the status of value judgments and the roles they might legitimately play in scientific inquiry. Two common concerns relate to the proper *scope* of the legitimate use of value judgments in science, and whether there are significant differences between value judgments and factual judgments with respect to their *revisability*. Let me take up these common questions first.

With respect to scope, Mills offers the narrowest view, suggesting that value judgments play roles only at the margins of science. Clough, true to her Quinean commitments, which hold that factual judgments and value judgments are part of a seamless whole in the web of belief, offers the most expansive view, allowing no principled barriers between facts and values anywhere. Janack agrees that insofar as I subscribe to Quinean holism, there is no genuine problem of scope, because scientific inquiry is not clearly delineated from ordinary inquiry, which already incorporates value judgments. Instead of speaking of science and ethics as distinct, self-contained realms, she suggests we consider the enormous variety of methods and concerns among the different sciences. Values may be more relevant to some of these sciences than to others. Alcoff similarly suggests a highly contextualized view, leaving open the question of where values might play a role in science.

I largely agree with the contextualists here: there is not much we can say about the role of value judgments in science across-the-board (where science is defined here as the collection of disciplined and systematic modes of inquiry into the particular subjects that we dub “the sciences”). Whether value judgments play a legitimate epistemic role in any particular realm of inquiry depends on examining it at a more fine-grained level than the artificial science/ethics dichotomy offers. Nevertheless, we can say a little more about scope than simply “we have to look and see whether value judgments help here.” All inquiry is directed toward answering a question. Where the question is value-laden—for example, when it asks about the impact of some practice on human well-being—successful inquiry will need to engage assumptions concerning well-being. If we make false assumptions about the constituents of well-being, then no matter how empirically accurate our conclusions are at a descriptive level, we will have failed to answer our question adequately.

The second common question among my critics concerns the revisability of value judgments. Only Clough argues that value judgments are on a par with all others with respect to revisability. Janack and Mills agree that value judgments tend to be closer to the core, more resistant to revision than other judgments. Alcoff argues that this is the way they ought to be, too. We feminists need to dig in our heels on behalf of feminist values: “What empirical facts could revise the commitment to take into account women’s own subjective point of view, to accord women autonomy and self-determination, to value their needs and interests and desires and rights to bodily integrity at least as highly as we value all others? For that kind of claim, we need a value commitment that is not revisable” (4).

I join forces with Clough here. There is no general difference between value judgments and other sorts of judgments with respect to revisability. Some value judgments, such as that all persons have equal moral standing regardless of race, sex, and other social classifications, are close to our core. Others, such as the judgment that divorce can be good for people, including women and children, are more revisable. But factual claims fall along the same continuum. It would take some earth-shattering evidence to shake our conviction that looking at things nearly always yields reliable evidence about them. By contrast, whether eating a low-fat diet helps prevent heart attacks is a highly revisable judgment.

Yet, even with respect to core value judgments, revision is possible. Were this not so, feminists could not challenge core patriarchal values. Like all specific judgments, patriarchal value judgments depend on factual claims. For example, the subordination of women has traditionally been based on claims that women lack the capacity for autonomy. This is empirically false. Alternatively, patriarchalists have claimed that women’s subordination is needed to ensure the survival of society, to prevent anarchy or other social disasters. These empirical claims are also false. Alcoff argues

that, even after all such evidence is in, an anti-feminist could resort to claiming that women’s interests simply do not count; that women lack moral considerability.¹ I know no patriarchal ideology that has asserted this. They have rather claimed to uphold male supremacy on the ground that this is better for everyone. This claim presupposes that everyone in society has interests that count in moral assessment. Still, suppose we found a patriarchal ideology that denied that women have moral considerability. It would still need to point to a factual difference between men and women that could justify such a difference in moral considerability. This is no accident. Moral differences supervene on factual differences. Hence, assertions of moral difference are vulnerable to empirical inquiry.

This reply also provides an answer to Alcoff’s challenge: what evidence, she asks, could make us overturn our judgments that women’s autonomy should be respected and that women are entitled to equal moral standing? Well, if investigation found that women really did only have the cognitive capacities of children, then it would make sense for autonomous men to govern their lives, as parents govern their children. And if investigation found that women lacked whatever qualities make for moral standing—say, the capacity to feel pain, or to exercise agency, to cite two common criteria—then women would not count as morally considerable beings. Of course, such possibilities cannot be taken seriously. But that is only because the overwhelming weight of evidence is against them. It is not because our judgments of moral considerability are unrevisable in light of evidence.

Mills allows that there is no categorical difference in revisability between value judgments and factual judgments. But he worries that an objector might hold that value judgments *tend* to be more dogmatically held. Given this tendency, an opponent of value-laden inquiry has grounds for resisting the integration of value judgments into scientific research. If we do not want scientific research to degenerate

into dogmatism, it is better to keep value judgments out of them.

Mills' hypothetical opponent reminds me of the story of the priests who were asked by an opinion pollster whether it is alright to pray while one is smoking. "Of course," they said, "the Lord is ready to listen to us at all times; we should always be able to communicate with Him, no matter what we are doing." The pollster then asked whether it is alright to smoke while one is praying. "That would be terrible!" the priests said, "when praying, people should be single-mindedly focused on the Lord, and not distract themselves with base activities." The high priests of positivistic science respond similarly. I could ask, "Is it alright to scientifically investigate the factual assumptions underlying value judgments, or should I just stick to them dogmatically, regardless of the evidence on how they work when we put them into practice?" And they would say, "Of course you should revise your value judgments in light of the facts, rather than dogmatically sticking to them." But then if I ask, "Is it alright to guide scientific inquiry in light of my value judgments?" they say, "Horrors! That would be to risk infecting science with dogmatism, which we cannot allow!" The difficulty is that it is precisely the segregation of evaluative from scientific inquiry that makes value judgments dogmatic. We cannot make our value judgments accountable to the facts without using them to guide our empirical inquiries. Otherwise, what we discover is unlikely to bear on our value-laden questions.

Nor do we have a serious choice to forswear making value judgments in science. As I have noted above, and elsewhere argued, whenever we ask a value-laden question, we need to use value judgments to guide scientific inquiry so it can answer that question (Anderson 1995). Vast realms of science, including all of the applied sciences (e.g., medicine, agrosience, and engineering) and most of the social sciences, are oriented to questions concerning how phenomena impact on human welfare, and how to make things serviceable to

human interests. Without making assumptions about human interests and wellbeing, without a *moral* compass, empirical inquiry in these sciences is directionless and can never hope to answer the questions we pose of them. We could, of course, choose to focus our attention on sub-questions within these fields that abstract from human concerns. For example, instead of asking which economic policies enable women to escape sexist oppression, we could devote our intellectual energies to investigating the properties of purely speculative mathematical models of economic systems. But this is to give up the likelihood that our discoveries will serve human interests. Segregate science from values and we get dogmatic values; segregate values from science and we get science that cannot answer our urgent value-laden questions.

Suspicious of some underlying epistemic asymmetry between value judgments and factual judgments nevertheless persist on the part of my commentators, Clough excepted. Janack argues that while I am right to argue that value judgments are not dogmatic when held as hypotheses to be tested, they are dogmatic when held as background assumptions guiding inquiry. This is in contrast with factual background assumptions, which may be held merely instrumentally, without scientists being committed to their truth. I think it is important here to distinguish claims of truth from claims of revisability. Even if it is the case that, when using a value judgment as a background assumption, we are normally committed to its having normative force, this does not mean that we hold it dogmatically. In another inquiry, we could hold its normative force open to question. We still hold it provisionally even when it functions as a background assumption that we are taking for granted in this inquiry.

Janack is worried that, on my view, we might choose to accept or reject a value judgment based on its fruitfulness in directing scientific inquiry, as we might accept or reject an instrumental background assumption for its fruitfulness. She argues that this seems to be the wrong reason to accept or

reject a value judgment. But I am not so sure that Janack has identified a significant asymmetry between factual judgments and value judgments. We can employ either a value judgment or a factual judgment instrumentally, on the mere supposition that it is true, in order to investigate certain phenomena. For example, an anthropologist might use a native's value judgments as a lens through which to view the native's social world, in order to make sense of its social norms and patterns of organization. This does not entail commitment to the normative force or "oughtness" of the native's value judgments. Of course, Janack would say, in that capacity it is not really functioning as a value judgment (as asserting a valid "ought"). Quite right; but by parallel reasoning, in its capacity as a merely instrumental judgment for navigational purposes, the assumption that the sun rotates around the earth is not held to be true, but merely a convenient perspective from which to determine one's location on earth. In *both* cases, the fruitfulness of the background assumption for inquiry *into these particular questions* does not support the truth of either the value judgment or the factual assumption.

However, in other cases we are willing to infer truth from the fruitfulness of a claim that is functioning as a background assumption. The assumption that all living organisms share a common descent has been enormously fruitful in biology: it has continuously uncovered *new* evidence that does not merely fit into existing theories, but enables us to elaborate on these theories, making them ever more empirically successful. Even though most of the time this background assumption of common descent is not functioning in biology as a hypothesis to be tested, but as a tool for uncovering data to test and develop other biological hypotheses, its consistent fruitfulness is evidence of its truth.

I will leave it to other philosophers of science to determine precisely when fruitfulness is evidence of the truth of a hypothesis and when it is not. All I need to show to secure the analogy to value judgments is that *sometimes*, the

fruitfulness of a value judgment is also evidence of its truth—that is, its normative force or "oughtness." This is not true with respect to all uses to which we might put value judgments in inquiry, as shown above in the anthropologist's case. But it is true with respect to questions we ask about how to live. My guide here is not Quine, but his pragmatist predecessor John Dewey. Dewey argued that value judgments function as tools for uncovering data for better living—or at least, that this is how we ought to treat them. We test our value judgments by living in accordance with them, and seeing whether we find the results satisfactory. One way they can be satisfactory is by continually *enriching* our experiences, by helping us discover *new* things we value, that we had not imagined before. This is fruitfulness. Dewey argued that aesthetic criticism works this way: we know we are on the right track when our aesthetic judgments help us discover new features of the artwork in question that we experience as valuable—it gives us an enriching insight into its value.

Dewey's point applies directly to the divorce case I discussed in my *Hypatia* paper. Should our background assumption be that divorce is a traumatic breakup of a family, or an opportunity for personal growth? Suppose a divorced woman takes up the latter perspective, not directly as an assumption to be tested, but as a tool for uncovering possible new ways to live. She explores new career options, dates new people, experiments with new ways of presenting herself to others. *If* she finds her new ways of life satisfying, then her outlook on divorce as an opportunity for personal growth is vindicated by its fruitfulness in helping her discover better ways to live. An observer could also use that same background assumption about the evaluative significance of divorce to explore its consequences, as Stewart's team did. The fruitfulness of this way of looking at divorce was vindicated in Stewart's study, and helps to confirm that this is an accurate perspective. (Notice also that adopting this background assumption is not a self-confirming belief.

Stewart's divorced subjects, and Stewart herself, could have discovered that, notwithstanding their hopes for personal growth, that they found their personalities to be brittle and constricted after divorce—irritable, depressed, resigned, overcome with bitterness and regret. This would be evidence for the judgment that divorce is fundamentally traumatic.)

Clough agrees with me on the revisability of value judgments in light of experience. Yet she resists my account of how emotional responses to things provide primary evidence for value judgments. On her account, grounded in Davidson's semantic holism, value judgments figure in the web of belief in exactly the same way as any factual judgments. There is no need to tie value judgments to any particular source of evidence. For Clough, this is an unnecessary detour to the conclusion we both share, that value judgments are subject to empirical support.

I am disinclined to follow Clough's holistic path because it does not show how to anchor the *normative* aspect of value judgments in empirical observation. "Thick" value judgments contain both a descriptive and a normative dimension, both an "is" and an "ought." For example, to judge that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a courageous man is to not just to describe King, but to appraise him. It is to judge that he *ought* to be admired or esteemed. It is easy to see how observation grounds the descriptive dimension of judgments of courage—we show how he faced up to danger without flinching, and held to his principles against severe criticism. But what observation grounds the normative force, the "ought," contained in this appraisal? Clough does not say. I say that emotional experiences have a special tie to normative force. Feelings of admiration are *evidence* of admirability, as desire is evidence of desirability. Of course, such feelings are defeasible. They can be based on mistaken descriptive judgments. They can also be based on mistaken standards of appraisal. The primary evidence for being mistaken about a standard of appraisal is itself tied to emotional experience: we act in accordance with the standard of appraisal, in an

experiment in living, and see if we feel satisfied by the results, or rather encounter problems and difficulties, which we experience in an unfavorable light, as distressing, humiliating, and so forth.

Moral philosophy has been dogged by a model of justification, known as reflective equilibrium, in which moral opinions are checked only by other moral opinions, without any connection to the wider world. This is like Scholastic science: to figure out the truth about the world, people reasoned from the opinions of Aristotle and his commentators, rather than going out and gathering observations based on experiments. To get moral philosophy beyond Scholastic methods, we need to identify a body of evidence for value judgments that is based on experiments in living.² The evidence critical to determining whether an experiment in living is a success or a failure is grounded in our emotional responses to our lives as lived in accordance with the value judgments we think, or hope, are correct, and not just our moral opinions.

Feminism is an experiment in living that could never have succeeded, even as far as it has, if women had not trusted their feelings of dissatisfaction with lives lived in accordance with sexist values they had long accepted, and if they had not tried novel ways of life in the spirit of testing whether they would be better, in light of their own experiences in living them. We cannot get beyond sexism without experiments in living, and we cannot judge their success without listening to our emotion-laden responses to these experiments.

References

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¹ Her words also suggest that claims about the good are merely descriptive, not evaluative. Value judgments only enter with claims about the right—about whose interests count and how much they count for purposes of moral judgment. Now it is true that claims about the good, when anchored in notions of well-being, are easier to ground in straightforward factual considerations than claims about the right. Nevertheless, claims about people's well-being are still evaluative.

² As I argue Mill did in my (1991), and Dewey did in my (2005).