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THE ART OF JUDGMENT

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Part One: On Evaluation and Its Enemies

Judgment - in the sense of evaluating and ranking - is not optional. It saturates intellectual, artistic, social and intimate life. Attempts to eliminate it produce not a world without judgment, but one in which judgment becomes hidden, unexamined, and therefore often more arbitrary.

Immanuel Kant's distinction in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of Judgment*, 1790) between *determining* (*bestimmend*) judgment, which applies a general rule to a particular case, and *reflective* (*reflektierend*) judgment, which starts from the particular and works toward the universal, remains the most useful entry point. Kant confined reflective judgment largely to natural beauty and art; my concern extends it to the full range of human evaluative life.

This essay offers not a *theory* of evaluation but a series of contributions to its practice as an *art*. That art is simultaneously ethical and aesthetic: the same principles illuminate the scrutiny of a philosophical argument, a wine, a piece of music, and a person. It is a form of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), a concept developed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* - which cannot be reduced to *techne* (skill or technique) because it operates on the irreducibly particular. It cannot be learned from a rulebook, only from sustained exposure to the act of evaluating itself.

Jean-François Lyotard, in *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1979), thought that established aestheticism inhibited artistic experimentation, and characterized postmodern culture instead in terms of eclecticism: "one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games". But Lyotard himself provided the rejoinder, a line often omitted by his admirers: "this realism of the 'anything goes' is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield". A world without judgment is, under present conditions, one in which all know—in the formulation of Oscar Wilde's Lord Darlington— "the price of everything and the value of nothing". The development of the art of judgment is one alternative to that consumerist world.

Intersubjectivity and the Partial Objectivity of Judgment

Judgment is not merely subjective. At the most basic level, this can be demonstrated empirically. Experimental studies—on [responses to Mondrian's proportional structure](#), on the [perception of colours perceived as natural](#), on [architectural symmetry](#), on the [kinematics of dance](#), on [musical parameters' relation to basic](#)

emotions, on the aesthetic appeal of poetic vividness, on literary criteria, or on forms of harmony in distinct aesthetic contexts—consistently show that some evaluative responses track features of objects that are not simply invented by the beholder. There is a non-trivial degree of convergence that cannot be attributed simply to idiosyncrasy or private whim. This does not dissolve subjectivity, nor the role of culture, training and biography; but it does make it much harder to sustain claim that all evaluation is essentially arbitrary.

Something structurally analogous holds in the domain of attraction: a large body of research on facial attractiveness, symmetry, visible health cues and conversational intelligence has shown meaningful cross-cultural convergence in evaluative response. This—while potentially uncomfortable—does not imply desire is fully objective, nor that those disadvantaged by such findings need reconcile themselves to being second-best. There are nuancing factors I will return to below. The point is that evaluative responses to people are not exhausted by subjectivism.

This is also visible in the grammar of evaluative utterance. When someone says to another “she is beautiful”, “this music is heartstopping”, “that film is riveting from beginning to end”, “he has a magnetism about him”, or “that speech contained penetrating insights”, the form of the claim reaches beyond “I happen to respond to X”. Such utterances are offered to others as in principle shareable, discussable, and contestable. Kant gave this its classic formulation: the *agreeable* is personal (“a violet colour is to one soft and lovely, but to another dull and faded”), but judgments of the *beautiful* speak with a “universal voice” and “demand the assent of everyone”. To call someone “magnetic” is not merely to register a preference but to present them as possessing a kind of socially intelligible appeal. David Hume, in *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757), resisted the slide from variation to arbitrariness by locating the standard in the “joint verdict” of qualified critics—marked by “strong sense”, “delicate sentiment”, practice, comparison, and freedom from prejudice. Neither Kant nor Hume imagines that beauty can be deduced algorithmically; both insist that some judgments carry a genuine claim upon others.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method, 1960)* rehabilitated the concept of *sensus communis*—not simply common opinion, but a cultivated practical sense, learned through participation in shared tradition, underlying both moral and aesthetic judgment—against the Enlightenment’s reduction of cognition to scientific method.

By this method, taste (*Geschmack*) and judgment (*Urteilkraft*) are a form of *knowing*—historically situated, trainable and in principle answerable to others—as presupposed by Hume’s “joint verdict” at the empirical level. The strongest objections to this line of thought—Pierre Bourdieu’s argument that what passes as universal taste is often socially stratified *habitus*, or some of Gadamer’s critics (especially those influenced by Jürgen Habermas) warning that appeals to authority and tradition can naturalize domination—should be admitted rather than evaded. They show that intersubjective evaluative judgment is rarely innocent, free of social formation, or beyond contestation. But they do not prove that judgment is arbitrary; they establish that its claims must be tested, criticized, and held accountable to broader publics.

Judgment is neither mechanical objectivity nor private caprice. It is historically situated, socially mediated, and publicly oriented—fallible, arguable, vulnerable to distortion, yet still responsive to features of objects, persons, and performances that exist outside of the beholder. We argue about beauty, magnetism, insight, artistic power, and practical wisdom, because such judgments are not demonstrable like measurements, yet neither are they merely reports of appetite. They occupy the difficult middle territory in which human beings try to make their responses answerable both to the world and to one another.

Identity Politics and the Retreat from Judgment

The strongest opposition to evaluation combines identity politics, therapeutic culture, and the conflation of critical assessment with harm. In 2023, [an article by June Gruber and others](#) introduced the concept of *scholarly harassment*, defined as “repeated mistreatment relating to one’s scholarly work, conduct or capabilities that is threatening, humiliating or intimidating”, especially when women’s research is accused of being “unscientific”, lacking in “rigour”, or “not objective”.

Others have gone further. [Lilith Whiley](#) asks whether the peer review process embodies “inherent toxic masculinity” and proposes replacing it with “emotionality and empathy”, on the grounds that scientific “reason” and “rationality” are “gendered and masculine constructions”. [Another article](#) drawing upon critical race theory claims that peer-review “is a process situated in white supremacy”, and calls for a form of “performative allyship” towards the work of black scholars. [The musicologist William Cheng](#), in a 2016 book, associates concepts such as aesthetic autonomy and academic freedom with a “paranoid” approach to scholarly truth, proposing a “care-oriented musicology”—without making clear who will adjudicate this or how.

These and other writings reveal something more significant than mere hostility to criticism: a broader sense of *entitlement*, in which the evaluator’s function is redefined from scrutinizing the work to supporting the scholar. To the extent that academia tolerates this redefinition, dwindling public confidence in its work becomes less puzzling. There is also a structural cost: insulating work from evaluation, on identity grounds, renders the work of female or minority scholars simultaneously protected and diminished, placed beyond the full regard that genuine evaluation implies, and ultimately enshrines an *ad hominem* principle in which scholar matters more than work.

It would be too convenient to leave the case for evaluation here, defended against these fairly easy targets. The idea of “concept creep”, as identified by [Nick Haslam and others](#)—the expansion of harm-related therapeutic categories such as bullying, mental disorder and trauma to include ever-milder cases—acknowledges the genuine value of some such extensions (such as making emotional abuse nameable) while identifying real costs: moral polarization, speech restriction, and the fostering of victim-based identities.

[Jane Fenton and Mark Smith](#) show that the rhetoric of words-as-harm has produced conditions in which, by one study, 67% of students report reluctance to speak about at

least one contentious issue. [Rachel Fraser](#)'s account of *aesthetic injustice*—arguing not against evaluation *per se* but against prejudiced misclassifications, or misreadings on the grounds of hierarchy—is a genuinely useful refinement. And some worries about intercultural aesthetic judgement are well-founded, even if [Bence Nanay](#)'s proposed remedy of “aesthetic humility” goes too far in the other direction, reducing culturally remote work to something outsiders may vaguely admire vaguely but not really judge, compare, rank, dispute or canonize—a soft quarantine disguised as sensitivity.

What unites the best of these criticisms is a serious concern: that evaluative authority has historically been used to exclude, marginalize, and silence, and that this history cannot simply be bracketed when reasserting the necessity of judgment. The answer, however, is not to abandon evaluation but to become more rigorous about the conditions under which it is exercised—more alert to whose testimony is discounted, more honest about selective application of standards, more insistent on consistency of critical tools regardless of the identity configuration of their object. The alternative—what I call the *managed affirmation* contract, in which institutional or group belonging substitutes for intellectual accountability—does not protect anyone for long. It merely relocates judgment into the informal, implicit, and uncontestable. That is definitely not progress.

The contemporary retreat from evaluation, in short, does not abolish judgment. It displaces it into registers—reputational, social, bureaucratic—where it can be less visible and therefore less challengeable. The art of evaluation is, among other things, a form of resistance to this displacement.

The Legitimacy of Intimate Evaluation

Intimate life is not a refuge from evaluation, but one of the places where it becomes most concentrated, most consequential, and hardest to evade. The notion that attraction might be purified of assessment—that one could choose lovers or partners without finding one person compelling, another disappointing or even repellent, one voice alluring, another flat, one presence enlarging, another diminishing—is not ethics but sentimentality masquerading as moral seriousness.

Desire is discriminatory by nature. People do not desire in the abstract, and desire cannot be forced. We desire this person rather than that one, for reasons that may be obscure, difficult to justify, embarrassing to admit, or only half available to consciousness, but reasons nonetheless. The modern squeamishness about saying this aloud has not abolished judgment. It has driven it underground, where it becomes less candid, less answerable, and often more mean-spirited. If one may not acknowledge that intimate life involves ranking, preference, disappointment, fascination, refusal, then one still does or evaluates those things—but furtively, euphemistically, with a bad conscience that helps nobody.

The great gain of modern intimacy is not the abolition of judgment but the freedom to exercise it and act on it. The freedom to refuse, to leave, to say no to what one does not want and yes to what one does, is a genuine social achievement. Any serious critique of contemporary erotic life has to be internal to that achievement, not a

disguised plea for compulsory endurance. Zygmunt Bauman's account of [liquid love](#) and related work by [Eva Illouz](#) capture something real about the consumerist drift of contemporary relations, but the problem is not that such relations evaluate too much. It is that they evaluate badly: too fast, too superficially, with the wrong instruments. Swipe culture screens surfaces efficiently and attends to persons badly.

There are, moreover, different depths of intimate evaluation. Some evaluations are immediate and unsurprising: of appearance, movement, voice, smell, bodily confidence, awkwardness, social ease. I observe and evaluate these continuously when I encounter others, especially women. I register who is in good shape or overweight, the bodily bearing, aroma, mannerisms, habits, tics, dress, and the gap between what one perceives that people imagine they "give" and what they actually "give off", to use the terminology of [Erving Goffman](#). I am sure many do the same with me. These attributes generally make a short-term impact, but others are more penetrating because they seem less detachable from the person: spark, vitality, depth, curiosity, style, erotic imagination, appetite for experience, humour, responsiveness, emotional presence.

The body of a woman in her twenties may be trimmer and smoother-skinned than that of one in her fifties. But, in my own past experience, some of the former can be vain, over-attention-seeking, sexually clueless, while some of the latter convey considerably more experience, charisma, wisdom, and sense of adventure, and thus have considerably greater personal and erotic allure. To be judged wanting on the latter factors is not like being told one has poor dress sense. It feels much closer to a verdict on one's mode of being.

There is also a developmental point here: those who build erotic identity primarily on surface attributes—youth, appearance, social performance—may be less likely to develop the deeper qualities that sustain desirability when these surfaces change. This is a developmental rather than primarily moral argument, and pretending otherwise helps nobody.

A further distinction matters, which opens directly onto the darker material below: the distinction between solicited and unsolicited evaluation. When someone asks a partner or lover for an honest view about their behaviour, appearance, emotional style, or effect on others, they invite asymmetry—they become the judged and the other the one judging—and accept the risk that accompanies it. Unsolicited evaluation may sometimes be warranted; silence is not always kindness. But the warrant is different. The words may be identical, yet their moral structure is not. A difficult truth offered in response to a question is one thing; a difficult truth imposed, unasked for, is another.

This is also why the erotic dimension of evaluation should not be denied. To be genuinely assessed by someone whose judgment matters, and to feel that one is not being managed, placated, or lied to, can itself be intimacy, as can the reciprocal experience of assessing. What is erotic is discerning attention, risk, exposure, the sense that another person's perception has really reached you. Even the mild breach of vanity—the calm, precise, affectionate deflation that punctures self-display without malice—can, in the right conditions, deepen contact rather than sever it.

There are intimate structure in which this invitation is not incidental but constitutive—in which the relationship is deliberately organized around one person's authority to assess and the other's chosen exposure to that authority. The erotic charge of such arrangements, where they exist, is clarifying rather than pathological: it names openly what evaluation in intimacy always partly is. The alternative to the consumer model is not the absence of judgment. It is judgment exercised with seriousness, reciprocity, and the risk of mutual exposure.

Intimate life is not to be sentimentalized into a zone of unconditional affirmation. It is to defend the reality that attraction, attachment, and desire involve evaluation, while preparing the ground for the more difficult claim: that intimate evaluation, precisely because it can be truthful and even deepening, also lends itself to a particularly nasty corruption.

Comprehensive Audit as Evaluative Pathology

There is a point at which intimate evaluation ceases to be truthful and becomes abusive. To see that point clearly, it helps to distinguish three postures. First, *legitimate frankness*: speaking the difficult truth that leaves the other person with something usable, even if painful—a fact, a judgment, a reality on which they may act. Such frankness need not be solicited; but for it to remain legitimate, it must be specific rather than exhaustive, purposive rather than self-serving, and leave the other person standing. Second, *evaluative cowardice*: the soft lie, the managed affirmation, the tact that curdles into evasion, resembling kindness but withholding what would actually be clarifying. Third, and much worse, a phenomenon touched upon in research on psychological/emotional abuse, and which I will call the *comprehensive audit*: the unsolicited, totalizing summing-up of another person's looks, character, sexuality, habits, history, social value, mental stability, and general worth, delivered in the register of honesty, maturity, or concern, but functioning to diminish, unsteady, and subordinate.

The distinction between cowardice and the audit is not merely one of degree. Cowardice withholds judgment; the audit weaponizes judgment into an instrument of domination. The comprehensive audit parasitically borrows the moral authority of honest evaluation—“I'm only being honest”. “You need to hear this”. “No one else will tell you”. “I'm trying to help you”. These claims are very often moral camouflage for something whose real aim is reduction. The audit wears the surface of candour while pursuing something quite different: the reorganization of the other person's self-understanding under hostile authority. It does not merely say, *here is something difficult but true*. It says, *let me sum up what you are*—and let me do so in terms broad enough that appeal becomes almost impossible.

That is why the comprehensive audit feels so different from ordinary criticism, even harsh criticism. It is invariably unsolicited. It arrives not in response to a question but as a verdict. It is absolutizing, not specific. It assembles the person into an indictment. It is often timed to vulnerability: after failure, during dependence, in the wake of confession, when the other has already exposed the old wound. Intimate knowledge, in decent hands, becomes a reason for tact. In cruel hands, it becomes a prosecutor's archive.

One especially insidious mechanism is the conditional improvement clause: *if you changed X, you would be more desirable*. In its abusive form, this installs the speaker as permanent gatekeeper of the other person's worth. It creates a contingency that is always theoretically reachable and practically unstable. The goalposts move, the deficiency mutates, and every concession licenses the next demand. Improvement is dangled and never secured. [Evan Stark's work on coercive control](#) is relevant here, even if it only addresses "men entrapping women", and he does not quite isolate this precise mechanism.

At its worst, the audit turns from attractiveness or conduct to what the other person cannot simply alter: depression, anxiety, trauma, neurocognitive difficulties, disability, family damage, the temperament with which they arrived in the world. This sort of audit is not identical with gaslighting, though the two may overlap. Nor is it simply false psychiatric labelling. The more poisonous version works by conscripting the social stigma attached to something real—a genuine diagnosis, an actual vulnerability—and turning it into a moral verdict on the person who bears it. "This is just your anxiety talking". "Your depression distorts everything". "You're too damaged to judge this clearly". "No one will believe you because you are unstable". At that point the evaluative act no longer even pretends to supply usable information. [The Lancet Psychiatry Commission report on intimate partner violence and mental health](#) set this out with unusual clarity, while [Miranda Fricker's](#) account of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice helps explain the deeper injury: not merely wounded feeling, but the erosion of one's standing as a credible interpreter of one's own experience.

The attack is launched against what the person did not choose and may not be able to change, then presented as realism, honesty, or concern. The abuser need not invent the trait. He or she need only exploit its stigmatized social meaning. The partner's actual vulnerability becomes both the weapon and the alleged proof that the weapon was justified. This is what distinguishes this variant as especially vicious, and what moves it beyond criticism into something closer to annexation. Despite the gendered bias of much literature, this can happen in any direction: women to men, men to women, in same-sex relationships. The mechanism is what matters: evaluative authority weaponized so as to reduce autonomy, confidence, and interpretive standing in an intimate other.

The distinction to hold onto, then, is not between positive and negative evaluation. It is between legitimate frankness, evaluative cowardice, and the comprehensive audit. Legitimate frankness tells a difficult but focused truth and leaves the other person with something they may act upon. Evaluative cowardice softens, lies, manages, and withholds. The comprehensive audit uses the language of truth in order to colonize self-understanding. Euphemism and demolition are both, in the end, evasions—the one of what is true, the other of what it costs to say so. The real art of intimate judgment lies in refusing both. That is the territory worth defending—and to inhabit which honestly requires moving, as Part Two does, from argument to evidence derived from experience.