

The Limits of Immanent Critique

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Abstract

The tradition of immanent critique promises a lot. It promises to be critical of the existing social order without appealing to ‘external’ normative standards. I argue that the prospects for immanent criticism are bleak: they must either commit to an implausible social ontology or to a flawed meta-normative theory.

[T]his is the illusion of the intellectual - that ideology must be coherent...

Stuart Hall, *Gramsci and Us*

§1 Introducing Immanent Critique

Suppose you want to criticise society.¹ Good! Here’s a natural way to go. First, fasten upon some principle or standard that strikes you as having normative authority – perhaps ‘inequalities are permitted only if they benefit the worst off’ (Rawls 1972), ‘repression is permitted only to the degree that is necessary for the perpetuation of human civilisation’ (Marcuse 2012) or ‘prisons should not exist’ (Davis 2011). Second, measure society against your chosen standard: assess whether all inequalities do benefit the worst off (they don’t), or whether there is surplus repression (there is), or whether prisons exist (they do). Excellent: you have found society wanting. Things are as they ought not to be.

Any such critic faces three major challenges: the normative authority challenge, the epistemic authority challenge, and the practical authority challenge:

The normative authority challenge. The critic appeals to a principle. But not all principles have normative authority. Take Foot’s example: *invitations addressed in the third person must be answered in the third person*

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(Foot 1972). You might try to criticise me by pointing out my violation, but your critique will lack normative bite. That's because your principle lacks *normative authority*: I can violate it without doing anything wrong. The normative authority challenge says: the critic must say what distinguishes principles with normative authority from those without.

The epistemic authority challenge. Suppose we grant that *some* principles have normative authority. The epistemic challenge remains. For the critic must suppose not just that *some* principles have normative authority, but that *her* principles have normative authority. But why think she has landed on the truly authoritative principles? This challenge may be given a specifically political twist. Perhaps the critic's principles are ideological illusions: they appear to articulate binding claims, but in fact only serve the critic's class interests, or to legitimise existing unjust relations.²

The practical authority challenge. A standard has practical authority for an agent or group just so long as that agent or group is disposed to take themselves to be subject to that standard. Take Foot's standard again: *invitations addressed in the third person must be answered in the third person*. I take myself to be subject to this standard just so long as I am so disposed: I take the *mere fact* that some course of action would be to act in accordance with the standard as a reason to so act, and the *mere fact* that that some course of action would be to violate the standard as a reason to refrain from so acting. (Someone who takes the mere fact that some course of action would be to act in accordance with the standard as a reason to so act should be distinguished from someone who takes themselves to have reasons to act in accordance with the norm, but only because they want to avoid social sanctions, or to causing offence.) A social critic may appeal to a principle with normative authority, and *know* that their principle has normative authority. But if the standards they appeal to lack *practical authority* for their addressees – if they fail to touch the 'struggles and wishes' of their age (Marx 1975) – their critique is politically otiose; it is, at best, a merely intellectual exercise.³

Traditions of social critique may be distinguished, at least at the level of ideal type, by their characteristic response to these challenges. Analytic political philosophers typically answer the first challenge either with an appeal to something like robust moral realism – 'there *just are* some mind-independent, binding principles of (say) justice' — or to some form of contractualism – 'principles get their normative authority by being those to which reasonable agents

²For contemporary examples see Geuss 2016; Mills 2005. For older an example of the idea, see Marx's critique 'Robinsonades' (Marx 2005).

³These challenges apply to the critic regardless to which flavour of normative standard they invoke. Epistemic, political (assuming political standards are not just a kind of moral standard), and aesthetic standards are all subject to the same challenges. It sometimes seems to be assumed that the authority of epistemic norms is somehow more secure than that of moral norms (Geuss et al. 1981; Aytac and Rossi 2021). As an epistemologist, I find this faith in epistemic norms quite touching but bizarre.

would assent under certain to-be-specified conditions'. The tradition of immanent critique (from here: the immanent tradition) is suspicious of both such 'abstract' answers, in each case for broadly epistemic reasons. Take first the appeal to moral realism. Perhaps there are mind-independent principles of justice. Absent some account of why the critic has been granted epistemic access to these principles, it seems *dogmatic* for the critic to assume that they have fastened on the correct ones (Benhabib 1986). Now take the contractualist answer. Suspicion of contractualism lies deep in the immanent critic's DNA; her tradition emerges, at least in part, from Hegel's dissatisfaction with the contractualist heritage (Benhabib 1986). For Hegel, contractualism is guilty of an *epistemic circularity*:

Perhaps there is some situation such that the fact that a principle commands assent from reasonable people in that situation renders the principle normatively authoritative for *us*. But for us to come to know which principles are normatively authoritative, we would first need to know which situation is the relevant one – that is, we would need to know which situation is such that the principles to which reasonable people would assent in that situation normatively bind us. But there seems to be no way for us to work out which situation is the relevant one without our already knowing which normative principles are correct. That is, we can only use the contractualist apparatus to discover which principles have normative force if we already know which principles have normative force (Benhabib 1986; Hegel 1991).⁴

Thus, says the Hegelian, even if the contractualist can respond to the challenge from normative authority, they can't answer the epistemic challenge.

Attitudes to the practical authority challenge also distinguish the analytic and immanent traditions. Analytic political philosophy largely cedes its claim to (actual) practical authority. Rawls, for example, holds that a theory of justice must be capable of having practical authority for reasonable citizens *in an ideally just society*. But an immanent critic wants more: they want a normative standard with practical authority *for us*.⁵ For the immanent tradition, questions of practical authority are central. The immanent tradition says: a social critique which lacks practical authority – or at the very least some pathway to its acquisition – is politically useless. A critique without practical authority cannot yield considerations which its addressees might come to recognise as reasons for action.

⁴The immanent critic might add: how can we be sure of what reasonable people would do in circumstances so removed from our own?

⁵'But Rachel, this ignores (analytic) non-ideal theory!' No it doesn't. The main markers of non-ideal theory are its concerns with (i) corrective justice, (ii) partial compliance (iii) feasibility constraints, and (iv) justice enhancement (as opposed to justice achievement) (Mills 2005; Valentini 2012; Khader 2018). Each is distinct from a concern with practical authority.

1.1 External Standards

The immanent tradition’s signature is a rejection of ‘external’ normative standards. Immanent critique is not *normativistic*:

‘The phrase ‘normativistic’...signifies that *external normative standards* are introduced against which reality is measured – it is measured against an abstract ought...[By contrast] the critique of ideology...generates the standards needed to overcome a particular reality from the given norms and the given reality’ (Jaeggi 2009).⁶

Some immanent critics take the ban on ‘external’ standards to amount to a *containment constraint*, on which a social critique may appeal only to principles or standards *contained within* the society under evaluation (Honneth 2001; Diehl 2021; Stahl 2013). For a principle to be ‘contained within’ a society its members need not explicitly affirm it. It might instead be embedded within social practices or institutions (Stahl 2013; Diehl 2021; Jaeggi 2018), or the product of an interpretive reconstruction (Walzer 1993).

So construed, immanent critique might seem objectionably conservative. The worry is not that the would-be immanent critic must affirm existing social arrangements – a society can violate the principles it contains. Rather, the worry is that the immanent critic can play at most a *reparative*, and never a *transformative* role. To illustrate, consider two feminist critiques of the eighteenth century. Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges both demanded that women be educated. Wollstonecraft’s critique was *reparative*: she argued for the education of women by appealing to standards that her addressees accepted: educated women, she argued, make for better wives and more ‘sensible mothers’ (Wollstonecraft 1963). de Gouges, by contrast, appealed to a radical egalitarianism: women should be educated because they are men’s equals (De Gouges 1791).⁷ But whilst it’s natural to prefer Gouges’ approach to Wollstonecraft’s, only the latter satisfies the containment constraint.

The containment constraint also sits uneasily alongside at least one touchstone for the immanent tradition. In an 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx wrote:

‘[W]e do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one...The critic can...start out from any form of theoretical and practical consciousness and

⁶Hans Sluga offers a slightly different gloss of normativism: ‘the normativist [claims] that the general formulas (sic) it has extracted from actual political life have an objective and unconditional validity’ (Sluga 2014). A rejection of normativism in this sense would not distinguish the immanent tradition from the analytic. The Rawls of *Political Liberalism*, for example, does not offer his theory of justice not as some timeless rule; rather, he offers ‘a solution to what Rawls sees as a distinctively modern social problem: the problem of social co-operation under conditions of reasonable pluralism’ (Williams 2014). This is not, writes Rawls, ‘the problem of justice as it arose in the ancient world’; rather, it is a problem which emerges only after the Reformation (Rawls 1993).

⁷c.f. Benhabib on the distinction between fulfilment and transfiguration (Benhabib 1986).

from the forms peculiar to existing reality develop the true reality as its obligation and its final goal.

[...]

[W]e do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles' (Marx 1975).

Yes, Marx tells the critic to 'take his cue' from existing forms of consciousness. But he also urges that the critic not rest content with 'the existing principles of the world'. Rather, he must develop new principles from the old. Immanent critique proper, Jaeggi argues, is critique which satisfies this Marxian template: it *starts* with norms which are contained within society, but – unlike mere 'internal critique' – it does not *end* there (Jaeggi 2018). Let's make this concrete. Compare two critiques:

(a) Our society is governed by a meritocratic ideal. We think that those with the most talent should 'rise to the top'. But we fail to live up to these ideals. In fact, birth determines one's prospects more than talent or hard work. So there is something wrong with our society.

(b) Our society is governed by a meritocratic ideal. A meritocratic ideal has two major components. First, there is the idea that work and talent, rather than birth, should determine one's life prospects. Second, there is a rejection of the idea that justice requires equality of outcome: inequalities are justified so long as they are the result of talent. But a society which subscribes to such an ideal will invariably produce states of affairs which are unjust by their own lights. The meritocratically successful will pass advantage onto their children; eventually, inherited advantage will be a more powerful determinant of life prospects than talent, and the meritocratic ideal will be violated.⁸

Both critics point out a gulf between society's ideals and its actual functioning. But the first critic – the internal critic – presupposes that the meritocratic ideal could be met. It is a *contingent and correctable* failing of her society that it is not.

The second critic – the immanent critic – disavows the presupposition that the meritocratic ideal could be met. She argues that the very structure of the meritocratic ideal is *contradictory*. Any society governed in accordance with the ideal, she argues, will invariably give rise to circumstances which are unjust *by the lights of that very ideal*. For this second critic, the problem is not that we that we don't 'live up' our ideals. The problem is that the structure of our

⁸To be clear, I am not committed to these claims; their purpose is illustrative rather than argumentative.

ideals guarantees that we *could not* live up to them: they ‘give rise to effects that are directed against...themselves’ (Jaeggi 2009.)

Only the second critic, Jaeggi argues, has the tools to become an immanent critic *proper*. For the second critic uncovers not simple hypocrisy, but rather a practical contradiction. And by grasping the nature of this contradiction – by understanding why and how the extant ideal is defective – the critic can engineer a superior norm (Jaeggi 2018). On this model of immanent critique, a critic may appeal to norms which are not contained within their target society, so long as those norms have been engineered via a process of grasping the defects of those that are.⁹

Jaeggi’s model not only suggests that an immanent critic need not be restricted to reparative critique. It also explains the role of *crisis diagnosis* in the immanent critic’s project. Immanent critique differs from more traditional forms of political philosophy in having *diagnostic*, as well as *normative* goals (Benhabib 1986.) The immanent critic wants to uncover the tensions and ‘crisis-tendencies’ within their society. This interest is not merely *strategic*: the idea is not to work out where there are social tensions which might be exploited in the name of a pre-fabricated political goal (as, for instance, when the Nixon administration used unease around marajuna use to disrupt the anti-war left and black communities (Baum et al. 2016).) Rather, the diagnostic and the normative projects are more deeply intertwined: the critic is supposed to arrive *at* her normative principles through a process of crisis diagnosis. It is of just such a process that Jaeggi offers a template. By contrast, the merely internal critic can retain at most a superficial connection to projects of crisis diagnosis.

My project is to work out whether the immanent tradition, specifically, offers a viable template for social criticism.¹⁰ I am sceptical that it does. My intention is not to attack the immanent tradition with the aim of vindicating its competitors. My hope is that the paper will be useful even for those who seek to defend the immanent tradition, by making clear the precise nature of the challenges it faces, and the choice-points which confront its defenders.

Here is the plan. First, I lay out four basic desiderata for an adequate model of immanent critique. These desiderata are not desiderata which I, as some mean outsider, am imposing on the immanent tradition. Rather, the desiderata draw out commitments which are already embedded within the immanent tradition. In §2, I argue that immanent critique cannot satisfy these desiderata without committing to an implausible social ontology. This commitment both renders immanent critique unattractive on two separate grounds. First, the social ontology to which it is committed is implausibly inflationary. Second, even for those who find unattractive social anthologies attractive, there is a problem. The reliance on the inflationary ontology undermines the critique’s claim to practical authority. In §2.5, I consider a rejoinder on behalf of the immanent

⁹Admittedly, exactly how this engineering process is supposed to go is not entirely clear. More on this in §2.

¹⁰Internal critique, I put to one side; my project is not to re-litigate the debate as to its failings – for examples, see Cohen 1986; Okin 1989 – of whose seriousness I am, like Jaeggi herself, persuaded (Jaeggi 2018).

critic, but show that the rejoinder is flawed on meta-normative grounds.

1.2 Desiderata For Immanent Critique

Desideratum 1: Immanence. The immanent critic must not appeal to ‘external’ normative standards. A standard is external to some society if it is neither (i) *contained within* that society nor (ii) generated *from* those standards via a *grasp of their contradictions*.

Desideratum 2: Normative Significance. The critic must tell us that there is something *wrong* with our society.¹¹

To satisfy this desideratum, it is not enough, for example, to show that the norms and practices we endorse are historically contingent and socially constructed, or that what we have hitherto taken for granted could be otherwise. ‘To merely observe’, notes Jaeggi ‘that the status quo is ‘constructed,’ open to questions and generally changeable, does not by itself generate any criteria for deciding whether and why certain institutions and certain understandings of social reality are wrong...’ (Jaeggi 2009). Similar remarks apply to ideology critique in its ‘unmasking’ mode. In its unmasking mode, ideology critique shows (or tries to show) that some supposedly ‘neutral’ assumption or practice in fact serves the interests of social elites or, more broadly, that some supposedly ‘apolitical’ social artefact in fact plays a political function (Celikates 2006). (Geuss, for instance, argues that Rawlsian political philosophy serves to legitimise the privilege of the well-off (Geuss 2016).)¹²

Desideratum 3: Guidance. Suppose you visit an oracle. You know the oracle always tell the truth. You ask them: ‘Are things in my society as they ought to be’. The oracle says: ‘No’. You ask them, ‘what needs to change?’ They refuse to answer. The oracle is useless. Knowing that *something is wrong* is not enough – one also needs to know something about the direction in which things should change.

Crucially, the guidance desideratum is relatively weak. It does not require that the critic provide a detailed blueprint for a better society or a systematic theory of justice.¹³ A relatively open-ended demand like ‘decriminalise sex work!’ can satisfy it.

¹¹c.f. Finlayson: ‘Critical theory’s diagnosis of the social world is inherently a normative enterprise, since it involves judgments that the world ought not to be as it is, or about what is wrong with it’ (Finlayson 2009).

¹²Ideology critique occurs in other guises – one might critique an ideology by pointing out that it sustains injustice (Haslanger 2017). Ideology critique in this mode is just a version of normative political philosophy that happens to criticise ideologies, rather than formal institutions, or the basic structure of society. It’s normative political philosophy with a slightly cooler-sounding target.

¹³In fact, Geuss argues (somewhat implausibly, in my view) that the guidance desideratum requires that the critic refrain from doing those things (Geuss 2016).

Desideratum 4: Supra-Individualism. One thing a critic might do is criticise an individual agent. Another thing a critic might do is criticise a social institution, practice, or form of life. The immanent critic aspires to properly *social* criticism: criticism whose object is the patterns of collective life. Consider, for example, a mode of ideology critique aimed at exposing doxastic incoherence:

‘[On Nietzsche’s account] Christianity arises from hatred, envy, resentment, and feelings of weakness and inadequacy...Since it is a central doctrine of Christianity that agents ought to be motivated by love, and not by hatred, envy, resentment, etc., Christianity itself gives the standard of acceptability for the motives in light of which it is criticised.... Christianity requires of its adherents that they not recognize their own motives for adhering to it’ Geuss et al. 1981).

The Nietzschean critique of Christianity might show that Christians violate the standards of rationality. But its target is individual believers, rather than the social institution of Christianity. Hence such a critique does not satisfy the fourth desideratum.

§2 Immanent Critique Proper

The immanent critic, recall, does more than point out a gap between her society’s norms and its actual functioning. She points out such a gap but she does not suppose that it could be closed. Rather, she argues that there *cannot but* be a gap between her society’s ideals and its actual functioning. Her society’s ideals, she argues, are *structurally un-realizable*: any society structured in accordance with those norms will give rise to circumstances which violate those norms.

Three more examples will help to make the idea clearer:

(c) The bourgeois work work-oriented society secures the livelihood and social integration of individuals by allowing them to participate in the (free) labour market. But the work-oriented society is also disposed to give rise to structural unemployment; hence the work-oriented is disposed to block agent’s access to the very form of social integration it promises (Jaeggi 2018).¹⁴

(d) Every form of capitalist society harbours a deep-seated social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’ or contradiction: on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited

¹⁴Jaeggi is here adapting or reconstructing the critique articulated in Hegel 1991. See also Buchwalter 2017.

accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies (Fraser 2016).¹⁵

(e) In the Thebes of *Antigone*, there is a conflict between divine and human law. Divine law requires that Polynices' body be buried, but the King, Creon, has decreed that his body will remain unburied. The citizens of Thebes are genuinely bound by both divine and human law. However, the norms are not jointly satisfiable: it is not possible to both bury and not bury Polynices' body (Pippin 2013).

On Jaeggi's analysis, the bourgeois work-oriented society *cannot* satisfy its own standards of legitimacy. For such a society accepts (i) that a social order is legitimate only to the extent that it secures social integration, and (ii) that the proper route to social integration is participation in the labour market. But – or so goes the critique – any society structured around such ideals is disposed to generate high unemployment, and hence by its own lights be illegitimate.

In Fraser, we again encounter the idea of a structurally unrealisable set of norms. The norms of capitalism mandate unlimited capital accumulation. Capital accumulation requires social reproduction. But a society structured around the aim of unlimited capital accumulation will undermine social reproduction. Because capital accumulation requires social reproduction, this will impair capital accumulation: the society will hence fail by the lights of the very norm – accumulate capital! – around which it was structured. Similar dynamics recur in Pippin's Thebes. Here we have a pair of norms which give rise, in certain cases, to demands which cannot be jointly satisfied. The norms of Thebes will condemn Antigone whatever she does. If she buries Polynices, the norms of Thebes will condemn her insofar as she violates Creon's law. If she does not bury his body, the norms of Thebes will condemn her insofar as she violates divine law. Hence the norms of Thebes invariably give rise to situations those norms themselves condemn.

The goal of the immanent critic is to identify contradictions – that is, structurally unrealisable ideals within her society. For Jaeggi, it is crucial that the ideals on which the critic focus be *constitutive* norms of the target society – it is not enough to identify defective norms where those norms are merely regulative (Jaeggi 2018). (Jaeggi, for example, argues that the norms of civil liberty and (formal) equality are constitutive norms for bourgeois-capitalist society (Jaeggi 2009).) For Nancy Fraser, too, the ideal form of immanent critique identifies pathologies in the norms which are *essentially* embedded within the target form of life. It is crucial to her critique of capitalism that the crisis tendencies she identifies are 'not accidental, but have deep systemic roots in the structure of our social order...the...crisis... indicates something rotten...in capitalist society *per se*' (Fraser 2016). Fraser makes it clear that stakes here are political. If the

¹⁵c.f. the Rawls of *Political Liberalism*: 'the fact of reasonable pluralism shows that, as used in [*A Theory of Justice*] the idea of a well ordered society of justice as fairness is unrealistic. This is because it is inconsistent with realising its own principles under the best of foreseeable conditions' (Rawls 1993).

roots of the crisis she diagnoses lie in the essential structure of capitalist social organisation, then:

‘[T]his crisis will not be resolved by tinkering with social policy. The path to its resolution can only go through deep structural transformation of this social order’ (Fraser 2016).

We can generalise. If the critic identifies some flaw in a merely inessential, regulative social norm, then the society might abandon said norm without really changing, in any deep way, what kind of society it is. If we switch from playing chess standing up to playing chess sitting down, we are still engaged in the same kind of activity. By contrast, if we switch from playing chequers to playing chess, we have to altered our activity in some more profound way: we have altered its nature. Only when the critic identifies a defect in an essential social norm do they have a case that society must alter its nature.

Now for the crucial question: ‘What’s *wrong* with a practically contradictory society?’ The question is crucial because the immanent tradition provides a template for social critique in which the task of the critic is the identification of practical contradictions. If such a template has a hope of satisfying the normative significance desideratum, there needs to be something wrong with a society which suffers them.

My ‘crucial question’ might sound idiotic. Isn’t it just *obvious* that there is something wrong with a society whose norms are such that implementing those norms invariably gives rise to circumstances which those very norms condemn?¹⁶ Answer: no. It’s not at all obvious.

2.1 Unrealisable Norms and Self-Undermining Norms

First of all, there are straightforward reasons to be sceptical that there is anything intrinsically wrong with being governed by a structurally unrealisable norm (or set of norms). Let’s start simple. Here is a norm I take myself to be subject to: update only via conditionalisation. (I don’t actually take myself to be subject to this norm, but lots of people do, so let’s pretend for the sake of argument.) At least for creatures like us, this norm is structurally unrealisable. First of all, we don’t satisfy norm. Second, it’s not mere happenstance that we don’t satisfy it. Rather, our failure to satisfy it is a consequence of deep features of our cognitive architecture. We lack the computational resources that would be required to satisfy this norm. To satisfy it, we would need to become entirely

¹⁶Jaeggi sometimes puts things slightly differently and speaks of norms giving rise to effects which are contrary to the effects *at which the norms aim*. I find this a confusing way of speaking because I don’t think norms, as opposed to the agents who adopt such norms, ever ‘aim at anything’. And at least on one promising way to make sense of talk of norms aiming, a norm aims at some state of affairs iff following, or trying to follow the norm is disposed to give rise to said state of affairs in normal circumstances. Clearly Jaeggi can’t help herself to such an interpretation on pain of inconsistency: on such an interpretation, it would be definitionally impossible for norms to be self-undermining: any effect they reliably realise would automatically count as an end at which they aim. A better gloss in this context might be: a norm N aims at those states of affairs which do not violate N .

different kinds of creatures. It follows that any human agent who adopts this norm invariably finds themselves in states which are not permitted by the norm. But there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with adopting such a norm, or incoherent in positing that humans are subject to it.

One might object that structural unrealsability, as defined above, is not the target concept. Rather, the target concept might be something more like that of a structurally *self-undermining* norm. In the case above, the updating norm I adopt is structurally unrealisable – because I can never act as the norm requires me – but it is not structurally self-undermining because my adoption of the updating norm does not make me more likely to violate that very norm. The fact that I violate the norm is, as it were, ‘baked into’ my cognitive architecture; the fact that I have adopted the norm makes me no worse at satisfying it than I otherwise would be. One can certainly imagine a case in which the updating norm is self-undermining in this sense. Imagine an agent who adopts the norm and becomes so anxious about updating that he becomes worse at approximating the states required by the norm than he was before he adopted it. But in this case, there does seem to be something wrong in his adopting the updating norm. So whilst there might be nothing wrong with structurally unrealisable norms, there is something wrong with structurally self-undermining norms.

One problem with this response is that it becomes, conditional on our accepting this amendment, unclear whether our guiding examples of immanent critique may be counted as such. The norms of Thebes, for example, are structurally unrealisable, yes but they are not structurally self-undermining. Antigone's failure to jointly satisfy these norms is ‘baked in’ to their content. It is not a consequence of her inhabiting a society for which these norms have practical authority.¹⁷

For a harder case, consider the immanent critique of meritocracy. (My remarks generalise *mutatis mutandis* to (c) and (d).) The immanent critic contends, plausibly enough, that the meritocratic ideals – an uneasy fusion of egalitarianism with respect to *opportunity* with an insistence that the meritorious enjoy the fruits of their merit – is unrealisable. But it is far less clear that the meritocratic ideal is self-undermining. A sincere meritocrat might say:

Certainly, the meritocratic ideal cannot be realised. But a society structured in accordance with meritocratic ideals will nonetheless come closer to satisfying those ideals than will societies structured in accordance with alternative ideals (for example, those of feudalism).

Perhaps the meritocrat is confused. The immanent critic responds:

¹⁷ *Maybe* it's in some sense incoherent to endorse norms such that there are possible situations in which it is impossible to satisfy both. But it's not obviously incoherent. I think I must keep my promises, and I also think that I must not buy children knives. But these rules can come into conflict (for example, if I promise to buy a child whatever she wants for her birthday and she asks for a knife.) For those who think one must never endorse N_1 and N_2 unless there is no possible situation in which N_1 and N_2 are not jointly satisfiable, my arguments with respect to the practical incoherence imperative (see §2.2) apply *mutatis mutandis*.

You've misunderstood my critique! (And indeed (*eyeroll*), the whole *point* of immanent critique!) My point is that your *very own values* would be better realised by implementing an alternative set of norms. Your very own egalitarian commitments, for example, your commitment to equality of opportunity, would be better realised in a society structured around a more demanding egalitarian ideal, for example, an ideal of equality which requires (rough) equality of outcome.

But the clear-eyed meritocrat should not be moved by such a response. The critic contends that the meritocrat's *very own values* would be better served by ideals he disavows. But this is plausible only given rhetorical sleight of hand. If *all* the meritocrat valued were equality of opportunity, the critic might have a point. But the meritocrat values both equality of opportunity *and* desert. And only one of these values would be better served by norms favouring equality of outcome. The critic has no argument for thinking that the specific fusion of values professed by the meritocrat would be better served by socially implementing an alternative set of ideals. They do have an argument for the claim that there is a kind of internal tension within the meritocrat's conception of the good, insofar as different strands of the conception will invariably pull them in different directions. But such internal tensions are a mark of any moderately complex moral picture – they will, for example, be a feature of almost any picture which admits of incommensurable goods – rather than a sign of an intolerable incoherence. The upshot is that the immanent critic who is sufficiently fastidious about the distinction between unrealisable and self-undermining norms presents us with a template for immanent critique whose application to particular cases promises to be so fiddly and contentious as to make for a rather unappealing prospect.

2.2 Practical Coherence

Let's put this worry to one side. Suppose we show that the meritocrat endorses a self-undermining ideal, rather than a merely unrealisable ideal. We would then, surely, have a normatively significant critique of the meritocrat: we would have shown them to be guilty of something like practical irrationality. For an agent to adopt a self-undermining norm is tantamount to their violating one of the most basic norms imaginable:

Practical Coherence Imperative. Do not both adopt some end and impair one's ability to realise that end.

Perhaps. But the immanent critic – recall the fourth desideratum – is not after a critique of individuals, but of social formations. It is not enough to show that an individual who subscribes to a meritocratic ideology has impermissibly self-undermining commitments. They need to show that a social formation structured by or around the meritocratic ideal has impermissibly self-undermining commitments. But whilst it would be hard to doubt that

something like the practical coherence constraint applies to agents, it is less clear that it applies to non-agential systems. But if the practical coherence constraint does not apply to non-agential systems (and a complex modern society is a non-agential system) then the fact that a society is practically incoherent is normatively irrelevant.¹⁸ My worry, then, is that the immanent critic is guilty of a kind of sentimental anthropomorphism. They illicitly project norms of coherence – norms which really do have authority for agents – onto non-agential systems, and so tacitly commit to an implausibly inflationary social ontology.¹⁹

It's worth being explicit as to the precise dialectical force I take this argument to have. The argument is not, and does not purport to be, an argument that there is no way for the practical coherence constraint to apply to complex, pluralistic modern societies. Rather, it's an argument for thinking (i) that it would be surprising for the constraint to so apply and (ii) a diagnosis for why the immanent critic's strategy, at first glance, looks so compelling, viz., that we are disposed to model non-agential systems as agents (Heider and Simmel 1944; Barrett 2000).

The argument begins with an invitation to consider a pair of cases borrowed from List, Pettit, et al. 2011

Case 1: Expert Panel. An expert panel must to give advice on global warming. They seek to form judgments on the following propositions

Proposition P: Global carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels are above 6500 million metric tons of carbon per annum.

Proposition P \rightarrow Q: If global carbon dioxide emissions are above this threshold, then the global temperature will increase by at least 1.5 degrees Celsius over the next three decades.

Proposition Q: The global temperature will increase by at least 1.5 degrees Celsius over the next three decades (List, Pettit, et al. 2011).

The experts' judgments are as shown in the table below, all individually consistent. Assuming the group's attitudes to a proposition are determined simply by majority vote – the group endorses a proposition iff more than half of its members do – then the expert panel will come out as having incoherent attitudes (List, Pettit, et al. 2011).

	P	Proposition P \rightarrow Q	Q
Expert 1	T	T	T
Expert 2	T	F	F
Expert 3	F	T	F
Group	T	T	F

¹⁸Perhaps societies ought to be group agents. Maybe they should, but the ban on external standards means that such a claim is off limits to the immanent critic.

¹⁹The immanent critic turns out to be guilty of something like *moralism* in the sense that interests Raymond Geuss: their political paradigm is one extracted from the case of individual decision-making (Geuss 2016).

(List, Pettit, et al. 2011)

Case 2: Opinion Poll. An opinion pollster asks everyday members of a society for their judgements on the same three propositions. The pollsters discover that although every member of the sample has individually coherent attitudes, (again, assuming a majority vote procedure for aggregating judgements) the at the group level, the sample has incoherent attitudes.

Intuition one: if it turns out that the expert panel have incoherent attitudes at the group level, something has gone wrong. (List, Pettit, et al. 2011). Doxastic incoherence at the group level is a sign of irrationality – a normatively significant flaw – even if the flaw only emerges at the level of the group (that is, if all individual attitudes are coherent). Intuition two: incoherence in the collective attitudes of the poll sample is not a sign of irrationality (List, Pettit, et al. 2011). So long as every member of the sample has attitudes which are coherent at the individual level, incoherence at the group level is normatively unobjectionable.

There are two lessons. The first lesson is that there are groups to which even very minimal norms of doxastic coherence (‘Don’t have inconsistent beliefs!’) do not apply. The second is that judgements as to whether said coherence norms apply to a group pattern neatly with judgements about whether such groups are plausible candidates for group *agents*. The expert panel is plausibly a group agent, for there is a thick shared project – guiding government policy on climate change – to which each member of the group is committed. Together, these lessons suggest the following: coherence norms (norms like the practical coherence imperative) have authority for a group only if that group is an agent. This is bad news for the immanent critic. Complex, pluralistic modern societies look a lot more like the opinion poll sample than the expert panel. There is, for example, no substantive joint project to which I, along with all other Brits, have committed! Complex, pluralistic modern societies seem more plausibly regarded as non-agential systems than as group agents.²⁰

Next up: two responses on behalf of the immanent critic, and why they don’t work.

2.3 Bridging Principles

Bridging principles say that if a society endorses a self-undermining norm, individuals within that society will endorse a self-undermining norm. And given

²⁰It is worth briefly translating this argument into Jaeggi’s preferred idiom. Suppose we agree (i) to think of social practices as solutions to problems, and (ii) agree that a solution to a problem is defective if it is self-undermining, viz., if does not offer a satisfactory solution to the problem as the solution itself understands the notion of ‘a satisfactory solution’. That a society endorses a ‘defective’ solution is normatively significant only if it is wrong for societies to endorse a defective solution. But whilst it is true that an agent does something wrong if they endorse a defective practice – because such endorsement renders them guilty of incoherence – when a non-agential system endorses a defective practice, no wrong is committed. No wrong is committed because the sorts of coherence requirements that apply to agents do not apply to non-agential systems.

that these individuals are agents, we will have a normatively significant violation of the practical coherence imperative.

Such bridging principles are not appealing. First, the examples discussed above suggest that incoherence can emerge at the collective level. Second, such bridging principles cut against the historical grain of the immanent tradition. The philosophy of both Marx and Hegel is animated by the insight that in complex modern societies, the structure and functioning of social collectives takes place ‘behind the backs’ of individual citizens (Benhabib 1986). The citizen is subject, to laws not willed or fully comprehended by her (Benhabib 1986). Hence there is no guarantee that practical contradictions in the social structure will be shadowed by individuals’ psyches.

2.4 Agency and Responsibility

One might want to hold a society collectively responsible for, say, climate change. But perhaps we can only intelligibly hold a group collectively responsible if we treat them as a group agent.

The idea that we can only intelligibly hold a group collectively responsible if we treat them as a group agent is misguided. Here is an example. Imagine that there is a beautiful, remote mountain which many people enjoy climbing. The climbers seldom interact with each other – much of the mountain range’s attraction is the opportunity it offers for solitude. Clearly, the group of climbers does not count as an agent; there is certainly no shared goal to which each of the climbers has made an individual commitment: each climber goes to the mountains for her own purposes. (Note that this is perfectly compatible with each climber taking themselves to have a strong duty to aid any other climber who finds themselves in difficulty.) But now suppose that the mountain paths become eroded because of the climbers’ activity. No climber is individually responsible for the erosion – any individual climber walking on the mountain would have a negligible impact on the paths. Rather, the group of climbers is collectively responsible for the erosion. Attributing this collective responsibility is perfectly compatible with denying, as any sensible person should, that the group of climbers is not a group agent.

Let us take stock. Immanent critique promises to yield a normatively significant critique of society by way of diagnosing practical contradictions. But practical contradictions at the social level are only normatively significant if societies are group agents. Not only are the immanent tradition’s critical prospects are hostage to social ontology. The social ontology that the immanent critic needs is both inflationary and implausible. At least when we regard immanent critique from a historical perspective, this should not be all that surprising. Immanent critique, after all, has its roots in Hegel, for whom human social life belonged to the realm of ‘objective spirit’ and realised a form of ‘mindedness’ not dependent on individual humans’ consciousness (Neuhouser 2022). My argument, in this paper, is that, perhaps despite appearance, the immanent tradition of social critique is not detachable from these ontological commitments. Given how strange the ontological commitments are, that’s bad news for the immanent

tradition. Even if *you*, privately, happen to find the social ontology plausible, its strangeness will threaten the practical authority of any critique the ontology underwrites.

2.5 Outsourcing Strategies

So far, I have looked at one way in which the immanent critic might try to vindicate the normative significance of practical contradictions. I say: it doesn't work. But that doesn't, of course, show that there is no way for the immanent critic to vindicate the normative significance of practical contradictions. In this section of the paper, I consider the *outsourcing* strategy. The immanent critic who outsources tries to ground the normative significance of practical contradictions by linking practical contradictions to some further, normatively significant consideration. For the outsources, if practical contradictions at the social level are wrong, they are *extrinsically* wrong.²¹

(i) Societies ought to be stable. But societies which suffer practical contradictions have a tendency towards instability. Hence societies ought not to be practically contradictory.

(ii) Societies ought not give rise to normative expectations which they cannot meet. But societies which suffer practical contradictions have a tendency to give rise to normative expectations which those societies are structurally incapable of meeting. Hence societies ought not to be practically contradictory.

(iii) Societies must offer their participants norms capable of guiding and co-ordinating their actions. But societies which suffer practical contradictions cannot offer such norms. Hence societies ought not to be practically contradictory.

The first out-sourcer is interested in contradictions because they think that contradictions make for instability and social break-down. Let's sharpen this up. Any complex system is either in a state of equilibrium or disequilibrium. A system is in an equilibrium state iff its state will not change unless it is acted on by external influences. Otherwise, a system is in a disequilibrium state. Let's say that a society is strongly unstable iff it is in a disequilibrium state. A society in an equilibrium state is weakly unstable to the extent that external shocks move the system to a different equilibrium or to a non-equilibrium state, and stable to the extent that it is disposed to return to the same equilibrium state when exposed to external shocks (Garthoff 2016). A society in the grip of a practical contradiction looks to be in a disequilibrium state. Consider Fraser's critique of capitalism. On her analysis, the constitutive norms of capitalism organise behaviour (around the practice of capital accumulation) in such a way

²¹There may be other outsourcing strategies, but my objections will apply to those *mutatis mutandis*.

as to destroy the background conditions (the reproductive sphere) which make it possible for those norms to organise behaviour in the first place.²² Continuing to act in accordance with the norms will produce social breakdown, by producing a state of affairs in which it becomes impossible for those norms to regulate collective activity.

The second out-sourcing strategy ties contradictions to *frustrated normative expectations*. Here, the idea is that contradictory societies are disposed to generate normative expectations that they cannot satisfy. Consider the critique of the work-oriented society. The norms of work oriented society generate expectations in its members: they expect social integration by way of labour. (Arguably, too, the society depends on its inculcation of such expectations.) But the society is set-up, so the critic argues, to systematically frustrate these expectations – they cannot be met within the present social order.²³

The third outsourcing strategy appeals to the idea that societies must be capable of offering to their participants norms which guide and co-ordinate action (Call norms which are capable playing this role ‘conventions’). But societies which are practically contradictory look incapable of offering such norms. Consider Antigone’s situation. Because the norms to which she is subject cannot be jointly satisfied, these norms look incapable of offering her meaningful guidance.²⁴ Consider also the situation of subjects living through the sort of crisis of capitalism that Fraser predicts. If her predictions come to pass, then the conditions under which norms of capital accumulation are capable of guiding and co-ordinate collective action will be eroded.

It is important to distinguish these strategies.²⁵ Failures of guidance may lead to social instability or to frustrated normative expectations, but they need not. Similarly, frustrated normative expectations may sometimes be a cause of social instability, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient for its emergence. On the necessity point, note that the crisis tendencies that Fraser sees within capitalism are driven by capital accumulation’s tendency to erode its own conditions of possibility, a destabilising dynamic that need not depend on any subjective experiences of discontent. On the sufficiency point, note that frustrated normative expectations need not ‘bubble over’ into social unrest. They may instead be *managed*. (Indeed, at least on Benhabib’s reading of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, facilitating such management is precisely the role of the philosopher: the philosopher ‘[makes] the contradictions of the whole visible and intelligible to the bureaucracy...Insofar as philosophical exposition reveals the contradictions of the whole, it delivers the possibility of explaining the emergence of crises and of diagnosing their necessity’ (Benhabib 1986.)) Consider the critique of the work-oriented society. Perhaps it is true that such a society is set-up so as to systematically frustrate its members expectations of social integration. Expelled from communal life, they experience both poverty and humiliation (Buchwalter 2017). One might think: this need no lead to social

²²c.f Sankaran 2020.

²³c.f. Habermas 1985.

²⁴Though see Hughes 2019.

²⁵c.f. Benhabib on the distinction between lived and systemic crisis (Benhabib 1986).

unrest so long as appropriate compensatory measures, such as material and psychological assistance (Buchwalter 2017), are put in place.

Outsourcing strategies are flawed. Why think the principles to which the out-sourcer appeals – norms like ‘societies must be stable’ – have normative authority? The immanent critic is subject to a dilemma. Either she does or she does not claim normative authority for her favoured norm. If she does not claim normative authority for her favoured norm, then she cannot claim to satisfy the normative significance desideratum. (If there’s nothing *wrong* with instability, then the fact that practical contradictions (say) generate instability is normatively irrelevant, and so the normative significance of practical contradictions, the lynch-pin of the immanent tradition’s critical project, remains unsecured.) But if she *does* claim normative authority for the principle, she faces challenges to her normative and epistemic authority. I will argue that she cannot answer these challenges. (More carefully: she cannot answer them without appealing to the sorts of move she herself has condemned as dogmatic (normative realism) or epistemically circular (contractualism)). In the following sections, I consider two ways the outsourcing immanent critic might try to argue for the normative authority of her favoured norms. Neither is adequate.

2.6 Practical Authority to the Rescue?

Stahl seeks to ground normative authority in practical authority:

If one interprets a community as being committed to certain norms...the discovery that this community does [not] conform to...these norms, provides a *prima facie* reason for that community to change...its actual practice. This is for the following reason: if one is committed to some standard, then one has (at least a *prima facie*) reason to conform to it if no other considerations are in play (Stahl 2013).

But this is not very promising. Consider a community which is committed to the following norm: women who have pre-marital sex should be punished. It is obviously not appealing to think that the community has a reason to punish women who have pre-marital sex. Stahl responds:

The participants within that practice indeed have a reason to explicitly endorse their immanent commitments. It is just a very weak reason, given that there are many better reasons (for example, moral reasons) against it (Stahl 2013).

There are two problems with this response, one dialectical, one substantive. The dialectical problem is this. I agree with Stahl that there are moral reasons not to punish women who have pre-marital sex. (I’m not a monster!) But if our immanent critic starts appealing to moral reasons, he is appealing to *external* normative standards, and is an immanent critic no more. At best, Stahl provides a timorous defence of the immanent tradition, on which the best it can hope for is to serve as an easily-overruled side-kick to more traditional normative theorising.

The substantive problem is that Stahl's response does not succeed, even by its own modest standards. It is just not true that anyone who is committed to some standard has some reason (however *pro tanto*, however defeasible) to act in accordance with that standard. Suppose that I endorse, for no reason whatsoever, the following standard: *never wear matching socks*. One morning, without thinking, I put on matching socks. Upon noticing the matching socks, do I have any reason to take them off? No. What I *do* have is a reason not to wear matching socks *whilst endorsing a standard that says I shouldn't*:

(1) •(Endorse $S \rightarrow$ Satisfy S).

To allow otherwise is to license absurdities. It would be to allow that, once I come (*ex hypothesi*, for no reason) to endorse the norm, I could reason as follows:

I have some reason not to wear matching socks. But if I abandon the 'no matching socks' norm, I will be less likely to do what I have reason to do (viz., wear odd socks). So I had better continue to endorse the norm.

That is, it would be allow me to 'bootstrap' my way to reasons to endorse the norm in a clearly unacceptable fashion. But from (1) together with the fact that I do endorse S , it does not follow that I ought to satisfy S . (3) does not follow from (2):

it does not follow that:

(2) •(Endorse $S \rightarrow$ Satisfy S)& Endorse S .

(3) • Satisfy S .²⁶

For the inference to be licit, we would need to replace (2) with (2'):

(2') •(Endorse $S \rightarrow$ Satisfy S)&• Endorse S .

That is, for me to have reason to change my socks, I would need to have reason to endorse the 'no matching socks' norm, not merely happen to endorse it. More generally, one's acceptance of a norm gives one a (normative) reason to act in accordance with it only if one has (normative) reason to accept the norm. The lesson? Practical authority alone cannot ground normative authority.

The would-be critic might say: the social case is quite unlike your (*eyeroll*) fanciful sock case. When societies endorse norms, they typically have at least some reason to do so. Well, maybe! But any such reasons are themselves either (i) generated by standards which satisfy the immanence desideratum, in which case the problem of their normative authority is simply pushed back, or (ii) generated by 'external' standards, to which the critic is determined not to appeal.

²⁶Here's an example: [I can't yet think of a neat example that makes things vivid.]

2.7 Constitutive norms to the rescue?

Constitutive norms contrast with merely regulative norms. Some norm N is constitutive with respect to some practice P iff part of what it is to engage in practice P is to be subject to N . Consider the norm ‘players must attempt to checkmate their opponent’s king’. Such a norm is constitutive for the practice of playing chess. Someone who is not subject to that norm – who is not, in some sense, criticise-able for violating that norm – simply is not playing chess.²⁷ Now consider a norm like ‘be polite to your opponent’. Such a norm is not constitutive for, but merely regulative with respect to, the practice of playing chess – it is not part of what it means to play chess that one be subject to this norm.

Constitutive norms appear to have a special kind of authority for those engaged in the practices they govern:

‘If someone is building a house and if sheltering from the weather is a constitutive standard of being a house, then she cannot sensibly ask: Why should I care if the house I’m building cannot – because of my shoddy work – shelter its inhabitants from the weather?’ (Enoch 2006, drawing on Korsgaard 2009)

So perhaps the would-be critic can treat as authoritative those norms which are constitutive of their target society’s social practices.²⁸ Such a picture might seem to offer the immanent critic exactly what they need: an account on which certain norms really are binding *for us*, but on which their status as binding is grounded in their actual social role, rather than in some timeless moral law or abstract counterfactual scenario. On such a picture, so long as norms like ‘societies must be stable’ are constitutive norms of society – if part of what it is to be a society just is to be, in some sense, criticisable if unstable – then they will have normative authority in the context of social critique.

But things are not so simple. This strategy is vulnerable to Enoch’s shmagency objection. Suppose you somehow find yourself playing chess. You lack any reason to play the game of chess rather than some other game *shmess*, which is just like chess, except that instead of being governed by the constitutive norm ‘try to checkmate your opponent’, it is governed by the constitutive norm ‘try to *get checkmated by* your opponent’. You try to get yourself checkmated by your opponent. Are you thereby doing anything wrong? No. You are in fact playing chess, but in the absence of some reason to engage in that activity, you are, are perfectly justified in treating the fact that it is constitutive of chess that players should try to checkmate their opponents as normatively irrelevant (Enoch 2006).²⁹

We can multiply examples:

²⁷Time to scotch a potential misunderstanding: that N is a constitutive norm of some practice P does not mean that anyone who violates N thereby fails to engage in p . Knowledge is a constitutive norm of assertion, but liars – who say what they know to be false – make genuine assertions (Williamson 2002).

²⁸Note: there will be no guarantee that the norms which strike us as relevant for the project of social criticism will turn out to be constitutive (Diehl 2021).

²⁹c.f. Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018; Prinz and Rossi 2017; Walzer 2008.

‘That one toaster is better as a toaster than another is only normatively relevant – is only something you should care about when about to buy one of the two – if you already have a reason to get a toaster, to care about the constitutive function of toasters. If you like your bread fresh, and what you’re looking for is a toaster-shaped paper-weight, or some nice retro piece of kitchen decoration, you may have a reason to get a toaster, but you can remain entirely indifferent to which of the two is the better toaster. And, crucially, there would be nothing irrational about such indifference. The normative...relevance of the constitutive features of toasters is entirely parasitic on you already having a reason to care about it, or about the kind toaster. This seems true in perfect generality – no constitutive condition by itself ever secures normative relevance, its normative relevance has to be grounded in the normative relevance of the kind of which that condition is constitutive’ (Enoch 2020).

The general lesson is that the constitutive norms of a practice lack normative authority *even for practitioners*, unless said practitioners have a normatively significant reason for engaging in the relevant practice in the first place (Enoch 2006). The upshot for the would-be critic is this. Perhaps it is constitutive of a society that a society ought to be stable. But the stability norm has normative authority for us only if we are in fact in a society, rather than in a shmociety, where a shmociety is *just like* a society, except not governed by the constitutive norm of stability.³⁰ And any candidate reason to engage in the relevant practice (viz., the practice of society rather than shmociety) must either (i) itself be a constitutive norm of those practices, in which case the question of its authority is simply pushed back, or (ii) not itself a constitutive norm of those practices, in which case it’s authority cannot be accounted for in constitutivist terms.

2.8 Responses to the shmagency objection

Perhaps this is too fast. Let’s consider two challenges. First, the challenge from *jurisdictionally inescapability* (Hanson 2021). Second, the challenge from *normative inescapability* (Hanson 2021).

Jurisdictional Escape. Maybe Enoch’s case that constitutive norms at most ‘parasitic’ normative authority applies only to norms which are *jurisdictionally escapable*. A norm is jurisdictionally escapable for x iff it is possible for the norm to simply fail to apply to x , as the norm ‘you must try to checkmate your opponent’ fails to apply to me when I am playing cricket rather than chess. By contrast, if it is impossible for me to stop,

³⁰c.f. Jaeggi: ‘[J]ustifying norms in functional or ethical-functional terms means that they are held to be good for something. However, the validity of such norms within forms of life is established only in the context of a further determination of the purpose for which the practice and the overarching ensemble of a cluster of practices is good’ (Jaeggi 2018).

say, being an agent, then the constitutive norms of agency will not, for me, be jurisdictionally escapable (Hanson 2021).³¹

Normative Escape. A norm is normatively escapable iff I can violate it without doing anything wrong *even when the norm applies to me* (Hanson 2021). An example of a normatively escapable norm might be Foot’s norm of etiquette requiring that invitations addressed in the third person be responded to in the third person. Suppose I am in the process of writing a response to an invitation written in third person, and I respond in the first person. Clearly, the norm applies to me – I am engaged in exactly the activity regulated by the norm – but I am nonetheless not doing anything wrong, because the norm lacks normative authority. The challenge charges that Enoch illicitly assumes that because (i) the constitutive norms of chess and toasters are normatively escapable that (ii) all constitutive norms are normatively escapable (Hanson 2021). For example, it is arguably constitutive of the practice of friendship that one ought to participate in that practice. Here, the normatively significant reason one ought to participate in the practice is itself a constitutive norm of the practice. For the constitutive norms of friendship to have authority for an agent, then, they need not first have a normatively significant reason to engage in the practice that is ‘external’ to it.

I take the challenges in turn.

There are two reasons that the immanent critic cannot successfully exploit jurisdictional escape challenge. First, there is a problem in applying the template to the case at issue. To exploit the jurisdictional escape challenge, the immanent critic must argue that norms like ‘societies must be stable’ are not jurisdictionally escapable – that, collectively, we could not give up on playing the ‘society’ game and play, say, the ‘shmociety’ game instead. But it’s not clear that this claim is plausible. (Indeed, it is not, on reflection, entirely obvious that we are *in fact* playing the society game, rather than the shmociety game. If we are in fact playing the latter, then the relevant norms are not just jurisdictionally escapable but jurisdictionally escaped.)

Second, there is a general problem with the jurisdictional escape challenge. That quitting or avoiding some practice is not an option for x seems irrelevant to the normative status of that practice’s constitutive norms. In Margaret Atwood’s *Gilead*, it is constitutive of being a Handmaid that Handmaids must submit to sex with their masters (Atwood 2006). Someone might be utterly trapped in the role of Handmaid, such that its norms are jurisdictionally inescapable for her. It may (may!) be prudentially advisable for such an unfortunate woman to submit to sex with her master, but it is not wrong for her to

³¹One can read Jaeggi as suggesting such a response: ‘In contrast to the option of playing or not playing [a game]...participating in social roles often (or even typically?) involves nexuses of practices that are not purely optional for us. Norms of ethical life refer to contexts of social cooperation that – as antecedent nexuses of interpretation and practice – already exist and into which we are incorporated whether we like it or not (Jaeggi 2018).

resist submission. When it comes to wrongness, the jurisdictional inescapability of the norm is irrelevant.

Now for the normative escapability challenge. Whatever the merits of this challenges in other dialectical contexts (contexts, for example, in which the constitutive norms at issue are those of agency), this challenge cannot be successfully exploited by the would-be internal critic. To exploit the normative escape challenge, our critic must commit to the claim that (say) the constitutive norms of social practices as such – norms like ‘societies must be stable’ – are normatively inescapable. But, by their own lights, they can’t do this.

One reason they can’t do this is because such a move exposes them to the epistemic challenge. Suppose we grant that some of the norms which are constitutive of our shared practices are normatively inescapable, but that others are not.³² How are we to know which of the constitutive norms are the normatively inescapable ones? It is hard to see how the immanent critic can answer this question without falling into exactly the ‘dogmatism’ of which they accuse the analytic critic who appeals to moral realism.

To appreciate the second reason they can’t do this, we must distinguish between two ways in which a norm might be ‘external’ to a practice. One way a norm might be external to some practice P is by not being one of its constitutive norms. The second way a norm might be external to a P is by having authority for x not be dependent upon x ’s participation in the P . A norm that says *one ought to engage in the practice of friendship* is not external to the practice of friendship in the first sense. But it is external in the second sense: it has authority for us whether or not we are in fact engaged in the practice of friendship.

Generalising: to say of some norm N which is a constitutive norm for some practice P that it is normatively inescapable (for x) is to say that N ’s authority for x is not dependent upon x ’s participation in P . But that is just to say that the normative authority of a normatively inescapable constitutive norm cannot be accounted for in constitutive terms. Hence, the immanent critic faces a dilemma. Either they make no appeal to normative inescapability, in which case they give us no reason to think that the constitutive norms to which we happen to be subject have genuine normative authority. Alternatively, they do appeal to the normative inescapability of some constitutive norms. But if they do this, they appeal to norms whose authority cannot be accounted for in constitutive terms. In effect, then, the immanent critic appeals to norms whose authority they can give no adequate account of. This is a problem that is specifically a problem *for the immanent tradition*. Someone uncommitted to the immanent tradition might try to give an account of the normative authority of normatively inescapable constitutive norms in the register, say, of normative realism, or of contractualism. But the immanent critic conceives itself a standing in opposition to such ‘abstract’ accounts of normative authority. The result is that either (i)

³²Clearly, not all of the constitutive norms to which we are subject are normatively inescapable – see the Gilead example above. Further, the idea that all the constitutive norms to which we are subject are normatively inescapable is an unacceptable conclusion for someone who aspires to transform society.

the immanent critic can either give no answer to either the normative or the epistemic challenge, or (ii) they excise their own intellectual DNA.

Where does this leave us? For the immanent tradition to offer a model of social critique on which social critique can be normatively significant, practical contradictions at the social level must be normatively significant. I have examined two ways in which the immanent critic might try to vindicate the normative significance of practical contradictions. First, they might appeal to norms of coherence. This is not a promising strategy: it commits the critic to an implausible and contentious social ontology. Second, the critic might ‘out-source’, seeking to ground the normative significance of practical contradictions in the value of (to give just one example) stability. This is not a promising strategy either. The out-sourcer faces a dilemma: either they cannot satisfy the normative significance desideratum, or they must appeal to the sorts of ‘abstract’ meta-normative strategies that their tradition disavows.

§3 Conclusion

Prospects for the immanent tradition are gloomy. But: hope springs eternal. To conclude the paper, I sketch some options for the immanent critic.

The immanent critic might respond aggressively or concessively. An aggressive response would be something like: ‘actually, Rachel, societies *are* group agents’, or ‘actually, Rachel, the shmagency objection is rubbish’. Such responses try to show that my argument is straightforwardly mistaken. My focus here will be on concessive responses: responses which grant the substance of my argument, but try, nonetheless, to recover the interest and significance of the immanent tradition.

One option would be to *drop* or to *soften* the normative significance desideratum. The softening strategy might go something like this:

Sure, we can’t, using the immanent template, engineer a normatively significant critique of society. But we can engineer an evaluatively significant critique.

I give an evaluative critique of a knife when I say it is blunt, and an evaluative critique of an assassin when I say she is a bad shot. This kind of evaluative knowledge does not require knowledge of some practice-transcending normativity and is perfectly accessible to the immanent critic.³³ The trouble is that merely evaluative knowledge cannot guide action in the same way that normative knowledge can. An assassin can know that she is a bad shot, but that will not help her to figure out whether she ought to invest in shooting lessons – for that, she would need to know whether she ought to be an assassin. If we want social critique to guide political action, then merely evaluative critique is not enough.

³³Findlayson reads Habermas as going in for something like this strategy, though he notes that the reading is controversial (Finlayson 2009).

A more hard-nosed option would be to *drop* the normative significance desideratum entirely, thus re-construing immanent critique as an empirical technique, a method for predicting or perhaps retrospectively explaining the emergence of social crises (Pippin 2013). But this would be a costly re-calibration: the tradition of immanent critique self-conceives as something distinct from ‘value-neutral’ social-scientific projects (Benhabib 1986).

A second option is to drop or soften the Supra-Individual Desideratum. The supra-individual desideratum required that the immanent critic offer a genuinely *social* critique, rather than a critique of individual agents. I have argued that societies are not subject to the sorts of practical coherence norms that the immanent tradition invokes. But I am happy to grant that agents, *including group agents*, are subject to such coherence requirements. If such agents endorse self-undermining ideals, that is, very plausibly, a normatively significant problem. So although an immanent critique of society might not be possible, an immanent critique of you, or of me, or even an immanent critique of the state may still be in the offing.

Of course, even if the immanent critic sets their sights on a critique individual or group agents rather than on non-agential social systems, norms of practical coherence are still subject to the normative authority challenge. It is unclear that the critic can give a clear-eyed answer to this challenge without lapsing into argumentative strategies that they themselves consider dogmatic (realism) or circular (contractualism). This takes us to the final option for the immanent critic: dropping or softening the immanence desideratum.

The dropping option is clearly hopeless. Insofar as a rejection of ‘external’ normative standards is the immanent tradition’s signature, dropping the desideratum threatens to dissolve the tradition entirely.

Softening the desideratum may have a little more going for it. A softened immanence desideratum might, for example, allow the critic to ‘externally’ ground the normative authority of some purely *formal* norms – norms, for example, like the practical coherence imperative. But the execution of such a strategy would be a delicate matter.

There are two big questions for the immanent critic who adopts this strategy. The first question is whether there are any principled reasons, as opposed to reasons of face-saving theoretical convenience, to allow for, say, purely formal norms to be so grounded, but disallow the procedure when it comes to more substantive norms? The second big question concerns guidance. If identifying practical contradictions is to offer us political guidance, then the critic must be able to somehow able to extract ‘new’ ideals via their grasp of why, exactly, the old ideals could not be satisfied. (Otherwise the most they can do is tell us that something is wrong, without telling us anything about what we should be doing instead.) But above, I suggested that the envisaged procedure for engineering new ideals from old depends on contentious descriptions of the old ideals (by, for example, omitting the ‘desert’ component of the meritocrat’s ideal).³⁴

³⁴Note that even if these worries are misplaced, the critic will not be able to satisfy the guidance desideratum in societies which are ‘merely’ hypocritical.

It seems, then, that there is no particularly promising concessive strategy available to the immanent critic. The problems I have identified are not due to commitments on the part of the immanent tradition which can be easily weakened whilst preserving the tradition's spirit.

That spirit is nothing if not ambitious. But the ambitions of the immanent tradition, I contend, cannot be satisfied. They are, as it were, structurally unrealisable ambitions.

When I have presented this work, I have sometimes been asked: 'But where does this leave us? If you're right about the nature of these flaws, what are we supposed to do instead?' The question is often asked in a somewhat desperate tone, and I recognise the questioner's desperation in myself. I have tried to answer these questions sincerely: 'I do not know'. The immanent tradition tells us that understanding past failures can help us fashion new and better tools for the future. I hope that they are right.

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