

INVITED PAPER

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Wittgenstein Goes to Frankfurt (and Finds Something Useful to Say)

Abstract

This article aims to shed light on some core challenges of liberating social criticism. Its centerpiece is an intuitively attractive account of the nature and difficulty of critical social thought that nevertheless goes missing in many philosophical conversations about such thought. This omission at bottom reflects the fact that the account presupposes a philosophically contentious conception of rationality. Yet the relevant conception of rationality does in fact inform influential philosophical treatments of social criticism, including, very prominently, a left Hegelian strand of thinking within contemporary Critical Theory. Moreover, it is possible to mount a defense of the conception by reconstructing, if with various qualifications and additions, an argument from classic – mid twentieth-century – Anglo-American philosophy of the social sciences, in particular, the argument that forms the backbone of Peter Winch’s *The Idea of a Social Science*. Winch draws his guiding insights from the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, and one of the payoffs of considering Winch’s Wittgenstein-inspired work against the backdrop of Hegel-inspired work in Critical Theory is to contest the artificial professional strictures that are sometimes taken to speak against reaching across the so-called ‘Continental Divide’ in philosophy. The larger payoff is advancing, by means of this philosophically ecumenical approach, the enterprise of liberating social thought.

1. The Idea of Widely Rational Critique

It is plausible but by no means uncontroversial to suggest that liberating social criticism needs to be conceived so that it is capable

of harnessing the cognitive power of critical gestures that shape our sense of what is important, inviting us to see social phenomena in new moral and political lights. There is, admittedly, nothing contentious about the suggestion that utterances, inscriptions or images that alter what strikes us as important, and that as a result change our conception of the social world, can affect our understanding of social situations in accidental or external ways. But suppose that what interests us is not merely a suggestion on these lines. Suppose that we are interested in the idea that critical interventions that adjust our sense of significance can as such *internally* inform our understanding of decisive features of the social world and hence that, if we are to approach the task of criticism in a morally and politically responsible manner, we need methods and resources that take this possibility seriously.

Consider, as an initial, prospective example of the kind of critical exercise in question, the work of the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw and, more specifically, portions of Crenshaw's work in which she undertakes to shed light on harms done to black women in the U.S. who are victims of sexual violence. Crenshaw has written with great insight about, for instance, the case of Anita Hill, who in 1991 was subpoenaed to testify at the U.S. Senate hearings for Clarence Thomas' nomination to the Supreme Court because she told the FBI that, when she was working under Thomas at the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, he repeatedly subjected her to unwanted sexual attention (Crenshaw 1992). More recently, Crenshaw has discussed the case of Daniel Holtzclaw, a former Oklahoma City police officer, who while on the force systematically sought out women who were poor, black and had criminal records or legal troubles, sexually assaulting and raping them.¹

One notable presupposition of Crenshaw's treatments of these and other cases is that – in order to appreciate the awfulness of unwelcome sexual behavior visited upon women – we need to have

¹ See Amy Goodman's interview with Kimberlé Crenshaw and others, posted on www.democracynow.org on December 15, 2015 under the title "When Cops Rape: Daniel Holtzclaw and the Vulnerability of Black Women to Police Abuse" (Goodman 2015). Thirteen women ultimately testified against Holtzclaw, and in 2015 he was convicted by an all-white jury of crimes (including four counts of first-degree rape) against eight of them.

a vivid image of how, in our society, women experience disadvantages that are substantial, structural and pervasive, and how women therefore have vulnerabilities that unwanted sexual activity both exploits and exacerbates. That is a theme from classic feminist accounts of rape and sexual harassment, and part of what is distinctive about Crenshaw's work is that, in addition to sounding this theme, she stresses that, if we are to do justice to harms done to black women who are victims of sexual violence, we need to have a vivid sense of ways in which anti-black racism in the U.S. affects black women, interacting or – in Crenshaw's now widely used term – “intersecting” with sexism in a manner that effectively sexualizes it.² We need to be aware not only that rape and sexual assault have been conditions of black women's work lives for centuries but also that today there are still institutional remnants of associated myths about black women as “sexually voracious” and “sexually indiscriminate” (Crenshaw 1992: 411). For instance, we need to know that black women's words are less likely to be taken as truth and, further, that even in situations in which a conviction is secured for a sex crime against a black women the sentence is likely to be less severe than sentences imposed on men who commit the same crime against white women (Crenshaw 1992: 412 and 413).

A guiding motif of Crenshaw's work in this area is that our sense of the importance of these aspects of U.S. history need to inform our social vision if we are to be able to register the gravity of the harms done to black women who are victims of sexual violence. Crenshaw accordingly proceeds as a critic by trying to affect a shift in what strikes us as important. At the same time, she presents herself as, in this way, internally contributing to our understanding of real aspects of U.S. social life (viz., specific injuries done to black women). That is the sort of thing at stake in the claim that critical gestures that shape our attitudes can as such directly inform genuine or objective understanding.

However unsurprising it may sound in radical political and intellectual circles, this claim verges on philosophical heresy. At issue is a claim about how critical exercises that direct our attitudes may

² For Crenshaw's classic discussion of the importance of attention to *intersections* among forms of bias that affect women of color, see Crenshaw (1991).

as such be rationally authoritative. To incorporate this claim we have to expand – or ‘widen’ – a deeply engrained philosophical understanding of rationality so that bits of discourse that encourage us to look at things from new cultural or evaluative perspectives may as such have rational power. We might speak here of a *widely rational* conception of social criticism.

This conception has a clear moral and political appeal. By its lights, social criticism is conceived so that individual critics can’t antecedently exclude the possibility of needing to explore and perhaps embrace cultural or ethical values or historical perspectives that shape the social settings they are investigating. It follows that particular efforts at social criticism need not be vulnerable to charges – of sorts sometimes leveled at Kantian or formalistic modes of social criticism – of an *elitist* or *ethnocentric* tendency to impose already cherished values while being insensitive to the values of others. On the contrary, to the extent that critical exercises can be guided by novel ethical perspectives, they may wind up calling on us, not merely to adhere more consistently to certain of our core values or ideals, but to refashion or even abandon (‘unlearn’) these ideals. (E.g., in opening our eyes to vulnerabilities of and harms to women that we may not have registered, Crenshaw and other feminists call on us to revise our ideals of just treatment and non-violence.) Further, since the kind of transformative potential that social criticism has when conceived as widely rational goes hand in hand with a commitment to doing justice to how things really or objectively are, and since the notion of full-blooded rationality is thus in play, particular efforts at social criticism need not be vulnerable to charges – of sorts sometimes leveled at post-structuralist or other anti-universalistic modes of social criticism – of a *merely partisan* willingness to affirm whatever attitudes happen to be cherished by a given set of people at a given time. (E.g., there is no antecedent obstacle to representing Crenshaw, together with other feminist anti-racists who discuss sexual violence against women of color in a similar spirit, as thereby speaking with rational authority.)

Despite its evident moral and political interest, a widely rational conception of social criticism often goes missing from discussions about what social criticism is like. It’s not that theorists routinely

consider and then reject as untenable widely rational accounts of social criticism. More commonly, the possibility of such accounts simply goes unregistered, and it is suggested that we are confronted with a choice between, on the one hand, conceptions of social criticism on which it is essentially concerned with exploring the perspective and values of specific social contexts – and on which it is in this strong sense ‘context-sensitive’ – and, on the other, conceptions on which it is rationally authoritative. For an illustration of this trend, consider the distinction that the Kantian moral and political philosopher Onora O’Neill draws between critique that is “weakly normative” and critique that is “strongly normative”.³ When O’Neill discusses weakly normative critique, she has in mind critique that as she sees it cannot help but represent “normative claims as [...] more limited and less deeply justified” because it is anchored in the “conceptions, obligations and agreements of actual ethical codes as well as in the political institutions of a people” (2000: 719). When, in contrast, she talks about strongly normative critique, she has in mind critique that eschews the kind of context-sensitivity characteristic of its weakly normative counterparts and can, in her view, thus lay claim to “norms that have cosmopolitan reach and that supply the ground of the action of all people” (O’Neill 2000: 720). The very terms in which O’Neill discusses these two kinds of critique reveal that there is for her no prospect of social criticism that is both essentially context-sensitive and rationally authoritative and that is thus capable of combining the respective virtues of social criticism in what she describes as its competing weakly and strongly normative instantiations. The very terms that she uses reveal, that is, that there is for her no prospect of widely rational social criticism. Nor is O’Neill alone in overlooking the possibility of such social criticism.⁴

³ See O’Neill (2000). The translations of the passages quoted from this article in this paper are my own.

⁴ Although it is possible to use the work of a Kantian ‘universalist’ critic like O’Neill to illustrate the tendency to overlook this possibility, it is equally possible to turn to an anti-universalist to make the same point. For an anti-universalist critic who believes we are obliged to choose between what O’Neill would call ‘strongly normative’ and ‘weakly normative’ critique (while differing from O’Neill in opting for the latter alternative), we need look no further than the writings of Richard Rorty. (See my discussion of relevant aspects of Rorty’s work in Crary 2000.) For further examples of both universalist and anti-universalist varieties, see the text below.

Among other things, the past several years have witnessed the emergence of a ‘new’ set of debates about ideology and liberating critique within analytic philosophy – debates that, while politically laudable, likewise simply neglect the possibility of criticism that makes use of widely rational resources.⁵

2. Widely Rational Critical Theories

One good place to look for calls for widely rational social criticism is the philosophical tradition, associated with the Frankfurt School and placed under the heading of “Critical Theory”, that aims to promote an emancipatory politics by offering a special kind of theoretical image of society. A thumbnail sketch of this tradition might mention (e.g., in reference to the writings of Adorno, Benjamin, Habermas, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and many more recent thinkers) that it is united by a commitment to inheriting aspects of the epistemic status of Marx’s theory of society, as well as of Freud’s theory of the human psyche, in the development of a theoretical picture of society with liberating potential or, more succinctly, a *critical theory*. For the purposes of this discussion, we can set aside a historical account not only of attempts to describe and defend different critical theories but also of attempts to establish their Marxian and Freudian credentials. What is apposite is that these theories have generally been understood as characterized by the following cluster of elements. They are, to follow up on a concise and insightful formulation of Raymond Geuss’, as such capable of serving as “guides to human action” in that they both reveal to the agents who hold them “what their true interests are” and emancipate agents in the sense of “free[ing them] from a kind of coercion which is at least partly self-imposed”. Thus understood, critical theories have a kind of “cognitive content” that is non-scientific.⁶ Critical

⁵ Some of the most influential spokespeople for this emerging philosophical corpus are in effect ‘universalist’ theorists who don’t represent critique as essentially context-sensitive, even if at some level they aim to do so. This includes Miranda Fricker (2007) (for relevant commentary on Fricker, see Crary 2018c) and Jason Stanley (2015) (for relevant commentary on Stanley, see Crary 2017).

⁶ The inset quotes in the last two sentences are from Geuss (1981: 1–2). For another helpful and congenial overview of the tradition of Critical Theory, see Axel Honneth, “A Social

theorists reject the ‘positivist’ idea, sometimes traced to classic discussions in French sociology, that the kind of self-understanding that would free us from oppressive strictures is something we achieve by transcending all ethically loaded perspectives and adopting the standpoint of scientific experts.⁷ This idea is at times repudiated on the ground that it is inseparable from the paternalistic suggestion that ordinary (‘non-expert’) agents can’t help but be deceived about their own motives (see Celikates 2009: esp. 20–21). The resulting hostility to a scientific model goes hand in hand with an opposing understanding of critical theories as charged with exploring values embedded in particular social contexts and reflecting perspectives “immanent in human work” (Horkheimer 1972: 213). A signature slogan of Critical Theory is that social criticism is properly conceived as *immanent critique*. In virtue of their ‘immanent’ and ethically irreducible content critical theories are supposed to be able to demonstrate the sort of sensitivity to particular cultural contexts that makes it possible not only to avoid simply imposing values on these contexts but, at the same time, to achieve the emancipatory character to which the theories aspire. There is, however, significant disagreement within Critical Theory about how to construe the nature of the sort of irreducibly ethical content in question. A call for ‘widely rational’ modes of social criticism gets issued in one strand of what can be represented as a three-part dispute within Critical Theory about how best to understand the content of critical theories.⁸

Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory” (Ch. 2 of Honneth 2009).

⁷ Opposition to this positivist idea is a guiding theme of Max Horkheimer’s classic “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1972: esp. 198–199 and 232). See also in this connection Robin Celikates’ helpful reflections on the work of Émile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu in Celikates (2009: 39–98).

⁸ It would have been possible to frame this as a discussion about how to conceive the nature of *ideology critique*. The standard umbrella term for the theoretical images of society that critical theories aim to challenge is *ideology*, and, while in some conversational contexts “ideology” is used without any negative connotations, inside Critical Theory the term is typically employed pejoratively and in reference to ethically charged beliefs that are essentially woven into the fabric of, and inseparable from, social practices. (For helpful remarks on how ideological beliefs are inextricably ‘practice-soaked’, see, e.g., Geuss 1981: 5–7 and Jaeggi 2009: 64.) Any reasonable gloss on what is insidious about ideological beliefs would have to mention both an *epistemic* aspect having to do with ways in which ideological

Consider first a loose group of critical theorists, one that includes some of the currently most high-profile figures in Critical Theory, whose members draw some of their fundamental insights from Kant’s moral theory. The thinkers in question – who, for sake of convenience, might be referred to as “Kantian” – start from the conviction not only that irreducibly moral beliefs can be true full-stop but also that the revelatory and emancipatory character of the irrevocably moral accounts of society to which critical theories aspire are tied to their claims to unqualified truth. For these thinkers, the task of explaining how irredeemably moral beliefs can as such be wholly true represents a problem of the following form. The putative problem, which is rightly traced to Kant, receives its most influential formulation within Critical Theory in Jürgen Habermas’ relatively late discussions of what he calls “discourse ethics”. The ‘problem’ depends for its cogency on a widespread philosophical assumption – an assumption challenged by theorists whose work is discussed below – that the world is in itself bereft of value and that empirical or world-guided beliefs are therefore as such evaluatively neutral. Given this assumption, it appears there can be no question of representing the truth of irreducibly moral beliefs as an essentially descriptive or theoretical matter.⁹ The later Habermas’ alternative strategy for accounting for the truth of such beliefs is reminiscent of Kant’s categorical imperative. At its core is the idea that the question of the truth of moral beliefs is one we settle by asking, not theoretical

beliefs fail to truly capture the lives of the individuals caught up in the practices and institutions that they themselves support and stabilize and a *functional* aspect having to do with how these beliefs organize us “in relations of domination and subordination” (see Haslanger, no date: 1), thereby nevertheless assuming an aura of truth. Given that ideological beliefs have this sort of functional character, it seems clear that we need materially effective, non-neutral methods in order to combat them. Our answer to the question of whether these methods need to be regarded as in themselves non-rational – and hence as at best propaedeutic to ideology critique understood as a rationally respectable enterprise – or whether instead they may themselves qualify as rationally respectable ideology critique will reflect our views about the availability of a ‘wider’ conception of rationality.

⁹ For a defense of the idea that Kant should be credited with formulating a ‘problem’ on these lines, see Dieter Henrich, “The Concept of Moral Insight and Kant’s Doctrine of the Fact of Reason” in Henrich (1994: 55–88). For a helpful overview of places in which Habermas discusses this ‘problem’ and presents himself as inheriting it from Kant, see Jaeggi (2013: 33–38; 50–51). See also my comments on this topic in Crary (2007: 92).

questions about whether the beliefs do descriptive justice to the world, but rather practical questions about whether the maxims (or practical principles) they encode are ‘universalizable’ in the formal sense of being such that everyone could in principle consent to them. So, when in specific communicative contexts we advance moral views, we raise practical “validity claims” that are categorically different from the sorts of theoretical “validity claims” that we raise when in specific contexts we commit ourselves to descriptive views.¹⁰

A good place to turn for an insightful attempt to use the later Habermas’ modified Kantian normative theory to defend an idea of immanent critique is the writings of Rainer Forst. Like Habermas and other Kantian moral philosophers, Forst assumes that reality is as such devoid of value and that there can be no question of endorsing any sort of theoretical or realist approach to moral objectivity.¹¹ Also like Habermas and others, he tries to avoid retreating from universalism by adopting a strictly practical, formal approach to moral objectivity. Forst sets out to inherit aspects of Habermasian discourse ethics because he believes that, viewed against this basic Kantian backdrop, it can be seen to afford a good account of how moral thought can be both contextually sensitive and transcendent in a sense that endows it with objective authority. Taking his cue from Habermas, he represents demands for universal justification as arising in conversational contexts in which individuals make moral demands.¹² The result is supposed to be a “contextualist universalism” that, in addition to having a good claim to objectivity, has a good claim to cultural sensitivity in virtue of its context-situatedness.¹³ Notice that, on this Forstian account, the content of critical theories is objective in a wholly practical, non-theoretical sense.¹⁴ But this is not an undisputed account of the – immanent – content of critical theories.

¹⁰ For one of Habermas’ most succinct treatments of these issues, see Habermas (1999).

¹¹ See, e.g., Forst (2002: 156, 176, 180–181 and 190) and Forst (2014).

¹² For Forst’s own account of his inheritance from Habermas, see, e.g. Forst (2002: 192ff.).

¹³ See Forst (2002: 1, 60, 164, 172–173 and 197–198) and Forst (2014: 3, 9 and 107).

¹⁴ For some of Habermas’ direct expressions of this view, see, in addition to the portion of his work referred to in note 17, Habermas (1979: esp. 41–44 and 55–57).

A helpful way to introduce two of the most prominent competing accounts within Critical Theory is to mention a serious moral objection to which Forst-style Kantian strategies are vulnerable. Forst represents critical theories as culturally sensitive in the sense of being concerned with the justification of moral demands made in particular contexts. Further, in line with his Kantian inheritance, he conceives justification as proceeding according to an antecedently describable, formal method. The trouble is that this approach leaves no room for the possibility that we may need to explore particular cultural perspectives in order to recognize the correctness of specific critical inferences. (E.g., it leaves no room for the possibility – insisted on by whole generations of feminist theorists – that we need to look at society from a perspective informed by an appreciation of systematic and pervasive forms of sex-based discrimination in order to recognize that the concepts “objectification” and “harassment” apply to forms of some sexual behavior that had previously been regarded as merely annoying.)¹⁵ Forst’s Kantian approach thus seems to represent critical theories as ethnocentric endeavors, incapable of leading to radical questioning of a critic’s own normative ideals. Members of both of the additional groups of critical theorists at issue here agree that we must avoid vulnerability to this charge of ethnocentrism. But they adopt very different strategies for avoiding it.

Members of a second family of critical theorists resemble each other in taking some of their core ideas from postcolonialist or poststructuralist thought, and, for the sake of simplicity, might be described simply as “poststructuralist”. At the heart of the philosophical stance that unites the relevant theorists is the widely discussed idea that expressions acquire the status of signs as a result of being used in different contexts and that, when they are thus used, the meanings suffer a displacement that is a function of reflecting a language-user’s sense of the importance of similarities between previous contexts and the new context.¹⁶ With this idea in place, it appears not only that there can be no question of a wholly value-

¹⁵ For insightful discussion of the inability of Kantian approaches in ethics to do justice to feminist claims about *sexual objectification*, see Bauer (2015).

¹⁶ See, most famously, Jacques Derrida’s discussion of what he calls “iterability” in “Signature Event Context” (1988: 1–23).

neutral standpoint from which to survey the world but, moreover, that, if value-neutrality is the aim, it won't help to shift to the strictly formal modes of thought cherished by Kantians. Since, when we address formal questions, we are still dealing in signs, it seems to follow that we can't help but draw on our acquired – and non-neutral – sense of what counts, in particular contexts, as using them in the same way. What is distinctive of the work of poststructuralist theorists is not so much that they conclude from considerations along these lines that a value neutral standpoint for thought is forever beyond our grasp but rather that they take it for granted that neutrality is a necessary condition of true universality and that the loss of a neutral standpoint is tantamount to the loss of any claim to universal authority. One of these theorists' signature gestures is insisting that, if in moral and political contexts we follow in the footsteps of those thinkers, such as Kantians, who represent themselves as speaking in a universal voice, we effectively close our eyes to the fact that we are invariably guided by our own values and, as a result, veer toward a politically dangerous form of ethnocentrism.¹⁷ Poststructuralist theorists tend to combine the negative project of exposing universalists' aspirations to neutrality as both unrealizable and insidious with the positive project of pursuing liberating and illuminating images of society. They embark on this positive enterprise with the caveat that they shouldn't be understood as trying to arrive at – universally – true beliefs. They urge us to question the faith often invested in modern narratives of “progress, right, sovereignty, free will, moral truth [and] reason” and to promote an emancipatory agenda without imagining that we are capable of thinking and talking about the social world in a universally authoritative voice.¹⁸

One of the most ambitious recent attempts to use this basic poststructuralist posture to inherit the mantle of Critical Theory is undertaken by Amy Allen. In *The End of Progress*, Allen sets out to, in her words, “de-colonialize” contributions to Critical Theory that she regards as Eurocentric and hence incapable of overcoming political sins of Europe's colonial past (see Allen 2016, 15). She explicitly

¹⁷ The classic expression of this idea within poststructuralist thought is in Derrida (1976).

¹⁸ The inset quote in this sentence is from Brown (2001: 4).

takes her cue from poststructuralism in helping herself to the assumption that there is no ethically neutral standpoint for thought and that all thought is ethically engaged, and she takes this assumption to compel her to reject any sort of baldly universalist politics. An unqualified universalism of the sort that Kantians like Forst advocate cannot help, she claims, but (mis)represent as universal values that are merely local, and so cannot help but slide into ethnocentrism.¹⁹ A central preoccupation of her work is developing this claim in connection with the notion of *progress*. While Allen is happy to avail herself of talk of progress insofar as it is forward-looking and used to underwrite efforts to identify and agitate for liberating forms of social life, she wants to distance herself from any interpretation of such talk on which it is taken to presuppose the sort of ethically neutral standpoint from which, as she believes, a particular social change would have to be established as progressive once-and-for-all. This means that for her there is no way to look back at particular social changes and determine that, as a matter of fact, they count as progress. Admittedly, Allen denies that, in adopting this approach to progress, she is committing herself to a “first-order moral relativism” – of a sort often associated with poststructuralism – that would disallow talk of truth or objectivity (Allen 2016: 34, 65–66, 121 and 212–215). Yet, insofar as she depicts moral and political assessments as capable only of a type of ‘truth’ that is a mere reflection of specific cultural values, it is fair to describe the position she is laying out as relativistic at least, as it were, at the second order.²⁰ Setting aside any further discussion of how to describe her view, we can say that Allen believes that straightforwardly universalistic views inevitably lapse into ethnocentrism, thereby falling short of the emancipatory aims of critical theorizing. That is the fundamental thought that underlies her insistence that her poststructuralism-inspired position is the true heir of Critical Theory (see Allen 2016: xi). Notice how different the work

¹⁹ See Allen (2016, 2) and also Allen’s discussion of Forst’s work in Allen (2016: Ch. 4, 122–162).

²⁰ This relativistic or anti-universalistic gesture is, admittedly, intensely controversial within Critical Theory. It is sometimes suggested that theorists who deny that action-guiding social theories can have universal credentials are effectively abandoning the project of critique proper (or of *Kritik* with a big “K”) and so shouldn’t be credited with contributing to the enterprise of Critical Theory.

of critical theorists like Allen who take their cue from poststructuralism is from that of their Kantian counterparts. At issue are views that, unlike Kantian ones, treat the content of critical theories as falling short of wholehearted objectivity.

It's possible to introduce a third significant view of this content by mentioning a moral objection to which the foregoing post-structuralist strategies are vulnerable. Insofar as these strategies represent us as incapable of freeing ourselves from local ethical perspectives in a manner that would, as their advocates see it, allow us to speak in a universal or rationally authoritative voice, they imply that we are cut off from rationally advocating for radical social change. The point is not that they represent us as condemned to forms of conventionalism or conservatism.²¹ Theorists such as Allen who qualify as poststructuralists in the sense under discussion often insist that it is open to us to employ non-rational methods to persuade people to adopt new values or perspectives, thereby bringing about disruptive and liberating social changes.²² But they are obliged to add that any such changes will fail to qualify as objectively progressive, and they thus leave themselves vulnerable to the charge that they are at bottom merely advocating social remedies that happen to seem emancipatory to particular groups of people at particular times. That is, they leave themselves vulnerable to the charge that they are using theory to bully us into qualifying even our most careful critical conclusions.²³ (Suppose, e.g., that we affirm Crenshaw's claim that Holtzclaw's selection of socially particularly vulnerable victims made his actions especially vile and hateful. According to the poststructuralist line of reasoning I have been tracing out, theoretical considerations oblige us to qualify and hence weaken our view by at least implicitly appending a disclaimer about

²¹ For helpful discussion of these concerns, see, e.g., Celikates (2006: 29 and 2009: 165–167) and Jaeggi (2009: 272–273).

²² See the remarks above on Allen's preferred conception of social progress.

²³ For an elegant treatment of this theme, see Lovibond (1989). See also my critique of Richard Rorty's view of political discourse – a view that in fundamental respects anticipates that of Allen and other poststructuralists – in Crary (2000).

how this is just how things appear in the cultural context in which we find ourselves.)²⁴

What distinguishes a third group of critical theorists is a commitment to avoiding vulnerability, not only to charges of ethnocentrism of the sort that get directed at Kantian contributions to Critical Theory, but also to this further charge against poststructuralists. At issue in this last case is a group of theorists who might aptly be described as “left Hegelian”. While there is plenty of room for disagreement about what left Hegelianism amounts to, it is not unreasonable to use the label for a cluster of ideas that are pivotal for the thought of two notable contemporary thinkers who self-identify with the label, namely, Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi. Relevant here is the fact that, to begin with, Honneth and Jaeggi resemble each other in their embrace of Hegel-influenced and notably un-Kantian social ontologies on which social phenomena are constitutively ethical.²⁵ Honneth is signaling that he favors such an ontology when he insists on the need for political philosophy to recognize that an analysis of society is as such a source of critically authoritative normative insight,²⁶ and Jaeggi is, similarly, underlining her commitment to such an ontology when she moves from declaring that social understanding is as such ethically charged to chastising classic liberal political philosophy for what she sees as its self-deluding claims to “ethical abstention”.²⁷ Given their distinctive

²⁴ Poststructuralist theorists often present themselves as favoring *genealogical* methods, so it is worth accenting that the attack on poststructuralism-leaning critical theories just sketched is *not* an attack on the rational interest of genealogy understood – as David Owen, e.g., understands it – as dedicated to freeing us from pictures of our lives that hold us captive. (For Owen’s take on genealogy, see esp. Owen 2002.) Insofar as genealogy aims to get us to see that our current image of the world is not obligatory, say, by shifting our sense of what matters so that things look very different to us, it is – according to the wider conception of rationality at issue in this article – capable of contributing internally to rational understanding. This article’s attack on critical theories with a poststructuralist bent turns on the theories’ reliance on a ‘narrower’ conception of rationality that, as we might put it, seems to speak for stripping genealogy of this rational power.

²⁵ See Jaeggi’s defense of the view that social practices are “constitutively normative” in Jaeggi (2013: 140–198). Expressions of sympathy for a view on these lines are scattered throughout Honneth’s work. See Honneth (2009: 49); see also his remarks in Boltanski, Honneth, Celikates and Susen (2014: 567).

²⁶ This is a guiding theme of Honneth (2011).

²⁷ For Jaeggi’s use of this phrase, see, e.g., Jaeggi (2013: 14, 33–35, 38–40 and 451). Although Jaeggi inherits the phrase from Habermas, she manifestly gives it a distinctive twist.

ontological commitments, there can be no question for Honneth and Jaeggi of bringing into focus the worldly character of aspects of social life apart from the use of ethical resources. There is thus for them no problem – of the sort that Kantian critical theorists like Forst try to solve – about how to account for the truth or falsity of the irreducibly ethical beliefs constitutive of critical theories. That is, there is for them no obstacle to taking at face value the intuitive idea that the truth or falsity of these beliefs is in essential part a theoretical matter or, alternately, a matter of sensitivity to how things stand in the world. To be sure, their ontological views suggest the need for a distinctive account of what sensitivity to how things stand in the social world is like, and in fact Honneth and Jaeggi both stress that, by their lights, the internal exploration of immanent ethical perspectives is integral to the task of bringing social reality into focus.

This last shared gesture is pivotal for a left Hegelian emancipatory political posture. Jaeggi (2009: 74) emphasizes that it is possible to rely on the kinds of internal explorations of different immanent values that she exhorts us to undertake – in a manner that effectively immunizes her against the charge of ethnocentrism that Kantians like Forst have trouble shaking off – in promoting new practices and thereby issuing calls for “a transformation of the status quo”.²⁸ For his part, Honneth seems to have, to some extent, backed off of openness to the transformative potential of immanent critique, insofar as, in some recent debates, he rejects the idea that it can directly urge “normative revolutions”.²⁹ Yet it seems probable that this backsliding is driven by a very basic logical confusion. The spatial metaphor internal to the notion of ‘immanence’ is likely to have misled Honneth into accepting a dubious image of the realm of logic as partitioned so that there is a logical barrier preventing us from reasoning authoritatively all the way ‘out’ to revolutionary normative changes, as it were, from ‘inside’ our current logical position. But this sort of picture of distinct logics is untenable. In trying to develop it, we are obliged to adopt an internally inconsistent stance that involves representing any envisioned ‘revolutionary’

²⁸ See also Jaeggi (2013: 30–47 and 302–305), Honneth (2009: 32–35) and Honneth’s remarks in Boltanski, Honneth, Celikates and Susen (2014: 565).

²⁹ See Honneth’s response to critics of *Freedom’s Right* in Honneth (2015: esp. 208–211).

changes both as so opaque that there can be no question of a reasoned route to them from where we are and as nevertheless somehow intelligible enough that we can meaningfully think of ourselves as discursively cut off from them. If we free ourselves from the picture, then we can recover the thought that, for a left Hegelian, the reach of immanent critique is antecedently unconstrained.

Although left Hegelians agree with poststructuralists in rejecting the idea of an ideally dispassionate standpoint from which to survey social reality, their hostility to this idea takes a fundamentally different form. Poststructuralist theorists tend to assume that we can make sense of the idea of an ideally dispassionate standpoint at least well enough to use it to leverage a skeptical conclusion about the universal authority of ethically saturated modes of thought. An inference along these lines is, as we saw, what underlies Allen's rejection of a universalistic or objectively authoritative conception of progress. There is, however, no analogue to such an inference in the work of left Hegelians. Left Hegelian theorists are committed to a substantially more dismissive (or, as we might ironically put it, more 'deconstructive') attitude toward the idea of a wholly dispassionate standpoint on society as such. They typically treat this idea not merely as unrealizable but as incoherent. It follows that there is for them not only no question of appealing to it to antecedently impugn the universal import of irreducibly ethical modes of thought³⁰ but also no question of a priori obstacles to the sort of constitutively ethical social ontology that, as we saw a moment ago, they champion. Moreover, since, by their lights, there is no ground for denying ahead of time that an irreducibly ethical mode of thought might do objective justice to the social world, they are happy to allow that exercises of social criticism that essentially involve attempts to shift ethical perspectives may be rationally authoritative in an unqualified sense. Left Hegelians lay claim to a conception of reason that can certify the normative validity of immanently uncovered ideals, and they thus depart from poststructuralists in maintaining that it is

³⁰ See in this connection Jaeggi's attack on the idea of what she calls an "external standpoint" for critical thought in Jaeggi (2013: 282–283). For a similar gesture of Celikates', see Celikates (2009: 85).

possible to avoid any suggestion of ethnocentrism without forfeiting a straightforwardly universalistic conception of progress.³¹

Now we have before us an account of how the left Hegelian theorists deflect both the sorts of worries about ethnocentrism that plague Kantians and the sorts of worries about mere non-rational partisanship that plague poststructuralists. With reference to this account, it is possible to describe left Hegelians' distinctive view of the content of the irreducibly ethical beliefs internal to critical theories. Left Hegelians favor a view of this content that, unlike the view favored by Kantians, treats the content as unproblematically world-directed and that, unlike the view favored by post-structuralists, treats it as – wholeheartedly – objective.

This is the position within Critical Theory that equips us to talk about modes of social criticism that are 'widely rational' in that they may have rational power in virtue of provoking us to look at things from new, ethically laden, historical or cultural perspectives. (Notice, to return to this article's guiding example, that the position thus equips us to do justice to the power of the work of a social critic like Crenshaw.) Honneth and Jaeggi are underlining this aspect of their work when they discuss their preferred conceptions of 'immanent critique'.³² When they describe the critical methods they recommend as "immanent", they are flagging the fact that these methods necessarily involve the internal investigation of local ethical attitudes, and, when they lay claim to the label "critique", they are underlining the fact that their immanent methods are endowed with genuine – rational – authority. Here the point of speaking of immanent critique is to characterize critical procedures that qualify as, in the sense of this article, widely rational. *That* is what it means to say that a significant strand of thought within Critical Theory is dedicated to

³¹ See Jaeggi (2013: 272–274) and Celikates (2009: 22–23).

³² For references to "immanent critique", see, e.g., Honneth (2009: 49–50); see Honneth's remarks in Boltanski, Honneth, Celikates and Susen (2014: 567–569 and 573–573); and see Jaeggi's discussions in Jaeggi (2013: 54–55, 60, 257–276 and 277–309 and 2009: 74–75). See also Celikates' remark on how the forms of critique he favors are rightly described as immanent (see, e.g., Celikates 2006: 36, n.5). Lastly, see Celikates' defense of critical methods that are effectively (if merely implicitly) immanent, in Celikates (2009: 159–173).

the sympathetic elaboration of widely rational modes of social criticism.³³

When contributions to left Hegelian theory are received on their own terms, questions are sometimes raised about whether their claims to rationality are in fact defensible and, more specifically, about whether we are entitled to take immanent criticism as they conceive it to involve discursive moves such that any thinker who failed to recognize their correctness (regardless, say, of her individual historical or cultural orientation) would be missing something.³⁴ Partly in response to questions on these lines, Honneth and Jaeggi devote significant resources to providing a structure for describing the kinds of changes in social practices that they take to be rationally defensible. They argue that social practices can helpfully be seen as matters of problem-solving, and they describe what they regard as liberating social transformations as, to use Jaeggi's terms, "successful learning processes" that overcome "collective reflective deficits".³⁵ When Honneth and Jaeggi – and, indeed, also other likeminded theorists³⁶ – offer accounts of what they regard as rationally defensible social changes, they are illustrating the political interest of a wider conception of rationality. But they are not thereby defending it against the most stubborn objections to which it appears subject. To an overwhelming extent philosophical resistance to the idea of a 'wider' conception of rationality stems from a priori considerations. Although there are resources within Critical Theory for rebutting a priori objections to the idea of a wider conception of rationality,³⁷

³³ Notably, while sketching what is described here as the 'left Hegelian' view of critical theories in *The Idea of Critical Theory*, Raymond Geuss at one point declares that we require a "wider notion of rationality" (1981: 28).

³⁴ For a challenge of this sort, see, e.g., the question that Andreas Niederberger and Tobias Weihrauch (2015) raise, in their review of Jaeggi's *Kritik von Lebensformen*, about "how rational is the rationality Jaeggi discovers in the learning abilities of different life forms?"

³⁵ See, e.g., Part IV of Jaeggi (2013). For a congenial, earlier account of what it might be to establish the rationality of social practices, see Geuss (1981: 55–69).

³⁶ There are close analogues to the moments in Honneth's and Jaeggi's writings that I am discussing here in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. See, e.g., MacIntyre's account of how traditions can change in rationally defensible manners in MacIntyre (1988: Ch. 18), and in MacIntyre (1977).

³⁷ There are a priori considerations in favor of the (wider) conception of rationality that is required to underwrite left Hegelian conceptions of immanent critique in, among other places, the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

and although it is possible to find passages in the writings of contemporary left Hegelian critical theorists that explore these resources,³⁸ it is reasonable at this point to turn to a strand of thought in Anglo-American analytic philosophy of the social sciences that takes as its organizing theme a question about whether it is possible to overcome the kinds of antecedent obstacles that may seem to prevent us from conceiving rationality on wider lines.

3. A Widely Rational Reading of Winch

A helpful reference point here is Peter Winch's landmark 1958 book *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*.³⁹ Although one of Winch's main goals in this work is to defend a non-relativistic, 'widely rational' account of social understanding, there has been a great deal of debate about whether he succeeds. Today it is not uncommon to find thinkers representing Winch, without justification or commentary, as advocating some version of the sort of culturally relativistic outlook he claimed to be avoiding.⁴⁰ To be sure, there is a small and vocal set of readers who maintain that we should credit Winch with an anti-relativistic outlook that is capable of accommodating rationally authoritative modes of social criticism.⁴¹ This interpretative dispute, which has now run on for over half a century, is vexed and involved, and it makes sense to simply bypass it. Without getting distracted by exegetical questions about details of Winch's exposition, it is possible to isolate a pivotal strand of thought in *The Idea of a Social Science* – a strand of thought that develops themes from Wittgenstein's later philosophy and that is dedicated to motivating a view of the understanding of social phenomena on which such understanding is both objective and

³⁸ See, e.g., some of the references to Jaeggi's and Celikates' work in notes above. See also MacIntyre's discussion of relevant a priori themes in MacIntyre (1988: Ch. 17).

³⁹ Issued with a new preface in 1990.

⁴⁰ This view was defended plausibly by some readers writing at roughly the same time as Winch (see, e.g., MacIntyre 1967), and it still receives thoughtful defenses in the work of a number of readers today (see, e.g., Diamond 2015 and 2013; see also Risjord 2014: esp. 65–68).

⁴¹ Lars Hertzberg defended this view as early as 1980 in "Winch on Social Interpretation". For more recent efforts along the same lines, see Phil Hutchinson, Rupert Read and Wes Sharrock (2012), and Jonas Ahlskog and Olli Lagerspetz (2015).

ineradicably ethical. Winch tends to formulate this view by saying that, as he conceives it, social understanding resists assimilation to the natural sciences, and, in connection with this reference to “the” natural sciences, some commentators have argued that Winch takes for granted a now discredited, positivistic claim about the unity of the sciences.⁴² It is worth avoiding this further exegetical dispute except to observe that Winch’s argument for his preferred view of social understanding can be run without any such unacceptable claim.⁴³ It is possible, by following up on his argument for this view, to defend the sort of non-relativistic and widely rational account of social criticism that is pivotal for left Hegelian critique and, more generally, for politically liberating critical endeavors.

At the opening of *The Idea of a Social Science*, Winch announces that he is setting out not only to reject the (then venerable and today still widely held) view that to progress the social sciences must “emulate the natural sciences” (1990: 1)⁴⁴ but also to defend the opposing view that “any worthwhile study of society must be philosophical in character” (1990: 3). The latter view depends for its plausibility on the idea, which Winch seeks to defend in his book (and which is discussed below), that there is no such thing as a standpoint outside language from which to characterize the relationship between language and the world.⁴⁵ Suppose that, following Winch’s lead, we abandon as incoherent the notion of a view on language “from sideways on”.⁴⁶ Now it seems justified to represent the kinds of conceptual investigations undertaken in philosophy as capable of shedding light on what the world is like in a manner that

⁴² See, e.g., Roth (2006).

⁴³ For a defense of Winch against the charges Roth (2006) levels, see Cahill (2013).

⁴⁴ In his book, Winch critically examines the classic version of this view that is defended in the writings of John Stuart Mill (see 1990: Part III, 66–94). For a well-regarded, up to date defense of a view on these lines, see Rosenberg (2012). While the sort of natural-science oriented outlook that Rosenberg favors is today well received among analytic philosophers of the social sciences, it is much less well represented in European philosophy of social science.

⁴⁵ Winch offers his most quoted formulation of this view, not in *The Idea of a Social Science*, but a few years later in his influential article “Understanding a Primitive Society” (1964; reprinted in Winch 1972: 8–49). On p. 12 of this piece, he writes: “Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself *in* the sense that language has”.

⁴⁶ This is a well-known phrase from John McDowell.

isn't merely a matter of limning the contingent structures of the disciplines within which the concepts in question are at home.⁴⁷ Taking his cue from an observation along these lines, Winch sets out to defend a view of the relationship between language and the world that would enable him to treat an investigation of the concept of *social phenomena* as genuinely illuminating. That is what he has in mind when he calls for a rapprochement of philosophy and the social sciences. His aspiration is to show that, as he puts it, “the central problem of sociology, that of giving an account of the nature of social phenomena in general, itself belongs to philosophy” (Winch 1990: 43).

Winch starts his philosophical account of social phenomena from the uncontroversial idea that these phenomena are as such composed of actions or, as he puts it, of “meaningful behavior” (1990:45). He then claims that meaningful behavior is “*ipso facto* rule-governed” (1990: 52). This is a claim that, in the years after the publication of his book, he is eager to qualify. He revises it, he explains in 1990, both because he thinks it might wrongly seem to imply that all human activities are articulated in the same way and because he thinks it threatens to obscure the fact that different aspects of social life are “frequently internally related in such a way that one cannot even be intelligibly conceived as existing in isolation from others” (Winch 1990: xv–xvi).⁴⁸ Although Winch in these ways refines his position on the rule-governed character of meaningful behavior, he doesn't abandon the plausible thought that originally led him to bring up the topic of rule-following, namely, the thought

⁴⁷ This is one side of the “pincer movement” that, at the outset of *The Idea of a Social Science*, Winch declares he is setting out to make. The accent here is on Winch's efforts to distance himself from classic “underlaborer” conceptions of philosophy on which it is a parasitic discipline that solves “problems thrown up in the course of non-philosophical investigations” (1990: 4). The other side of Winch's project is distancing himself from “master scientist” conceptions on which philosophy “aims at refuting scientific theories by purely a priori reasoning” (1990: 7). To appreciate this part of Winch's project, we need to see that, as Winch conceives them, conceptual investigations, while capable of giving us second-order awareness of knowledge of the world embodied in our concepts, don't result in the sort of new empirical information that would make them competitors of any of the natural sciences.

⁴⁸ This quote is taken from Winch's Preface to the 1990 2nd edition of *The Idea of a Social Science*.

that meaningful behavior is as such (at least unreflectively) articulated in terms of concepts or universal categories and that it accordingly admits questions about what counts as going on and doing the same.⁴⁹ Since there is good reason to think that we can defend this thought on independent grounds,⁵⁰ it seems reasonable to proceed on the assumption that Winch is right to introduce it. He introduces it because he wants to show that, however apparently uninteresting, the conceptually structured character of social activities is of major philosophical moment. It is with an eye to showing this that Winch appeals to Wittgenstein's later philosophy and, more specifically, to Wittgenstein's later remarks on rule-following.

Operating with concepts or universal categories places us in the realm of rule-following, and a name is a universal category insofar as it can be applied in an indefinite number of circumstances. So, it shouldn't surprise us that, when Winch first broaches the topic of rule-following he considers the practice of using a name, viz., the name "Mount Everest". Winch imagines a scenario in which someone who is giving him English-language instruction tries to teach him to use this name by gesturing at the mountain through the window of an airplane. There would, he claims, be nothing objectionable about saying that either this definition "lays down the meaning" or that "to use a word in its correct meaning is to use it in the same way laid down in the definition" (1990: 26). But, he adds, talk of using a term 'the same way' doesn't do much work by itself. In the scene of language-learning he is describing, it would be unclear whether his teacher was giving the name of the mountain or the word "mountain" and, by the same token, unclear what 'using the term the same way' amounts to.⁵¹ What interests Winch here is not so much the possibility of misunderstanding but what this possibility reveals about what 'going on with a term in the same way' involves.

⁴⁹ Winch might plausibly be read as trying to find exceptions to this claim in his striking paper "The Universalizability of Moral Judgments" (1965). For reasons too involved to discuss here, this paper is problematic. Given that Winch doesn't mention relevant considerations in his 1990 remarks on *The Idea of a Social Science*, it seems reasonable simply to set it aside here.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of relevant topics, see Cary (2013).

⁵¹ I.e., since using a name for a particular mountain consistently and using the general term "mountain" consistently are different things.

What it reveals is that there is an element of context-sensitivity in the grasp of sameness that is internal to operating with a concept. Far from being the expression of a psychological mechanism that produces correct behavior in a manner independent of our sensitivities, such a grasp is inseparable from a sense of the importance of similarities uniting the context at hand with other contexts in which a concept is used.

Winch frequently speaks of “the necessity for rules to have a social setting” (1990: 33), and when he does so he has in mind this basic view of conceptual understanding or rule-following (i.e., a construal of it as presupposing a feel for a given context). In developing this view, Winch is – as he himself stresses – inheriting from Wittgenstein’s treatment of rule-following. Still borrowing from Wittgenstein, Winch goes on to suggest by means of a series of examples that the basic point he is making applies even to conceptual capacities – such as those we exercise in extending simple mathematical series – that may at first glance seem well suited to the context-independent model he rejects.⁵² Winch is preoccupied with these issues because they have a bearing on how we conceive social activities. Insofar as social activities as such involve conceptuality or rule-following, it is an implication of Winch’s larger argument that a certain sensitivity to context or social setting is necessary for participating in any social activity.

This account of social activities, however apparently insignificant by itself, has significant consequences for how we construe the *understanding* of such activities. To appreciate the kinds of consequences that interest Winch, it’s helpful to accent an aspect of his argument that he himself doesn’t underline. In defending his preferred account of social activities, he commits himself to a distinctive claim about understanding within the individual natural sciences.⁵³ When Winch is making a case for the account of social

⁵² See Winch (1990: 29–33). Around the time of *The Idea of a Social Science*, Winch is independently concerned to stress that Wittgenstein’s later remarks on rule-following represent a significant development in his philosophical outlook. See esp. “The Unity of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy”, Winch’s introduction to his edited volume, *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (1969: 1–19).

⁵³ Having already, at the opening of this section, flagged my awareness that the individual natural sciences involve different modes of understanding, it is worth stressing that the

activities he favors, he claims that sensitivities contribute internally to all conceptual capacities. This means that, to the extent that modes of natural-scientific understanding involve conceptuality, sensitivities contribute internally to these modes of understanding.⁵⁴

This view of understanding within the natural sciences forms the backdrop for the claims about social understanding that are the centerpiece of *The Idea of a Social Science*. Winch invites us to regard social understanding as resembling natural-scientific understanding in the following respect. Just as we require particular sensitivities to consistently apply the concepts internal to different forms of natural-scientific understanding, we require particular sensitivities to consistently apply the concepts internal to social understanding. At the same time, Winch brings out how social understanding is distinctive. He emphasizes that, in addition to resembling all other conceptual understanding in being rule-governed, social understanding takes rule-governed behavior as its object (see Winch 1990: 87–88). If we formulate Winch’s claim that rule-governed behavior necessarily draws on particular sensitivities by saying that this behavior is as such structured by practical normativity, then we can bring into relief what is noteworthy about this view of social understanding by saying that, unlike concepts characteristic of the individual natural sciences, characteristically social concepts trace out patterns in a ground that is essentially structured by practical normativity or, in other words, in a ground that is essentially ethically non-neutral. This means that we require sensitivities or modes of cultural appreciation not merely to project these concepts consistently (something that is also true of mastery of concepts characteristic of individual natural sciences) but also to grasp their

suggestion Winch is making here doesn’t depend for its soundness on any failure to acknowledge differences among individual modes of natural-scientific understanding. All it depends on is the thought that all natural-scientific modes of understanding, however different in other respects, involve conceptuality.

⁵⁴ It seems reasonable to suppose that Winch selects his opening example of a rule-governed social activity with an eye to making just this point. That is, he chooses an activity – viz., use of the name “Mt. Everest” – that involves concern with aspects of the physical world because he wants to impress on his readers that sensitivities are necessary prerequisites of the kind of consistent application of concepts that is internal even to various natural-scientific modes of understanding.

contents.⁵⁵ *That* is Winch's preferred conception of social understanding, and, as various commentators have noted, the passages in which he presents it are rightly taken to represent the climax of his early book.⁵⁶

One of the most arresting outcomes of the book's main argument is a conception of social understanding on which it is as such ethically charged. Granted that Winch as a rule represents social understanding, conceived in this manner, as genuine – not merely subjective – understanding, it follows that he is asking us to regard such understanding as both irreducibly ethical and objective. It follows, that is, that he is giving us an image of a region of objective reality as an intrinsically ethical realm and, by the same token, that he is placing himself in opposition to the sort of engrained conception of reality on which it is in itself bereft of ethical value. He is also thereby presenting a distinctive *social ontology*. At issue is an ontology on which objective features of the social world are irreducibly ethical and on which, in consequence, particular ethical attitudes may contribute internally to an objective understanding of these features. It is an ontology on which gestures that shape our attitudes may inform objective social understanding in a manner that is internal or direct (as opposed to merely external or accidental). That is what it comes to to say that Winch's ontology of the social leaves room for the wider conception of rationality at issue in this article.

To say this is not to address the vexed exegetical question of whether Winch describes such a conception of rationality in a rigorously consistent manner, or whether instead he sometimes talks about his preferred conception of rationality in a qualified and

⁵⁵ A case could be made for thinking that the concepts characteristic of the part of biology, sometimes called natural history, that is concerned with the description and classification of organisms, trace out patterns in a normatively structured ground. (For a defense of an account of natural history on these lines, see my commentary on Michael Thompson's work in Cray (2016: 5.1.i.) But the kind of normativity in question is not practical or ethical and hence different from kind of normativity that forms the ground for projecting characteristically social concepts.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Hertzberg (1980: 168–169), and Ahlskog and Lagerspetz (2015: 304–305).

relativizing style.⁵⁷ What matters is that it is possible to find in *The Idea of the Social Sciences* an argument for this ‘wider’ conception. Having now sketched the argument, it’s worth exploring the kind of philosophical opposition that a widely rational stance is likely to encounter, with an eye to building on steps that Winch takes toward countering this opposition.

Consider what seems, in the eyes of many thinkers, to exclude the very idea of a wider conception of rationality. This idea is in tension with the entrenched view that objective reality is as such bereft of ethical value, and, by the same token, in tension with the kinds of philosophical reflections that are standardly taken to render this view obligatory. These reflections typically begin from some version of the following image of how the mind makes contact with the world. Here our subjective makeups have an essential tendency to block our view of things, and it is only to the extent that we abstract from elements of these makeups that we can bring reality into focus. The idea is that, in trying to distance ourselves from all contributions from subjectivity, we eliminate from our conception of the objective world every quality that is ‘subjective’ in the sense that it can only be brought into focus in reference to aspects of our subjective endowments. Starting from a suggestive picture of the relationship between mind and world, we wind up with a conception of reality that, insofar as it is intolerant of all subjective qualities, expels the ethically inflected qualities that Winch-style social understanding takes as its object.

The Idea of a Social Science is organized with an eye to resisting this basic line of thought.⁵⁸ The line of thought is driven by the idea of

⁵⁷ There is good reason to hold with Cora Diamond – see, e.g., Diamond (2013) – that there are passages in Winch’s early work, and perhaps above all in “Understanding a Primitive Society”, in which he effectively slides into a relativistic posture. At the same time, it seems reasonable to think that Winch’s core philosophical commitments early on speak for an attractive, contextualist and decidedly non-relativistic account of social understanding.

⁵⁸ Some interpreters who take *The Idea of a Social Science* to be propounding a relativist view arrive at this reading because they approach his work through the lens of this line of thought (see, e.g., Risjord and Rosenberg). Other who recognize that Winch is hostile to the line of thought nevertheless arrive at similar readings because they think he fails to fully distance himself from it (see, e.g., Diamond). There are passages in Winch’s writing that might plausibly be read as expressing sympathy for the kind of relativistic position that he officially disavows. For instance, in *The Idea of a Social Science* he tells us that “criteria of logic [...] are

an obligation to abstract from all of our subjective endowments, and the book's argument is supposed to bring into question the very coherence of this idea by getting us to ask ourselves whether we have a clear notion of what satisfying such an obligation would be like. Consider again Winch on Wittgenstein's view of rule-following. Winch credits Wittgenstein with showing that mastery of a concept necessarily presupposes a sense of the significance of similarities uniting its uses in different settings. As we saw, Winch brings out how this Wittgensteinian lesson applies even to those conceptual capacities – such as, say, simple mathematical ones – to which it may at first glance seem most foreign. In thus borrowing from Wittgenstein, Winch is inviting us to see that, even if we are inclined to believe otherwise, we have no clear notion of what it would be for a conceptual capacity to count as wholly abstract. Winch's thought seems to be that this conclusion counts not only against the idea of an obligation to abstract from all of our subjective endowments but also against the ethically neutral conception of reality that this idea is sometimes taken to underwrite.

This thought is bound to strike many philosophers as simply wrong. This is because today the idea of an obligation to abstract depends primarily for its influence within philosophical circles on the assumption – not that one or another conceptual capacity meets the obligation but rather – that the obligation is satisfied by perceptual experience, where such experience is taken to be essentially a matter of the reception of content that is non-conceptual. Yet Winch doesn't criticize non-conceptualist views of perception. For this reason, both his attack on the idea of an obligation to abstract, and the case for a wider conception of rationality that he grounds in this attack, are likely to seem unconvincing. The point here is not that Winch is wrong to approach a defense of a wider conception of rationality by trying to dislodge the idea of obligatory abstraction. Nor is it that he is wrong to look for resources in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Although

only intelligible in the context of ways of living or modes of social life and that, moreover, different ways of living each offer “a different account of the intelligibility of things” (1990: 101 and 103). Or, again, a few years later, in “Understanding a Primitive Society”, he claims that different societies have different “standards of rationality” and that these standards “do not always coincide” (Winch 1964: 317).

Winch doesn't discuss these issues, Wittgenstein's writings do in fact contain resources for a direct assault on non-conceptualist views of perception. It follows that it is possible to employ Winch's strategy of inheriting from Wittgenstein to make a stronger case than Winch himself does against a call for abstraction, and to thereby also make a stronger case than Winch himself does for the sort of ethically-permissive conception of how things really are that is the ontological counterpart of a wider conception of rationality.

One good place in Wittgenstein's writings to look for expressions of the anti-non-conceptualist – or 'conceptualist' – view that perception is conceptual all the way down is the discussion, in Part II, §xi of the *Philosophical Investigations*, of the phenomenon Wittgenstein calls *changes of aspect*. Wittgenstein's aim here is to illustrate how, far from being independent of what is seen, conceptuality directly informs our perception. He proceeds by presenting us with cases in which we see something new in an object (a new 'aspect') while recognizing that the object has not changed. (Thus, e.g., when gazing at a set of lines on a piece of paper, we may suddenly see a figure in it, although the drawing itself is unaltered.) This presentation of cases doesn't amount to an argument for a conceptualist view, but there are resources for an argument elsewhere in Wittgenstein's writings, for instance, in the passages in the *Investigations* in which he is concerned with the privacy of experience. An important goal of some of these passages is – to simplify and condense quite a bit – to get us to see that non-conceptualists place inconsistent demands on what perceptual experience is like. With an eye to summarizing these considerations, we might start by noting that perceptual thought has a normative character that allows for questions about what justifies it. We might then add, plausibly if not wholly uncontroversially, that, with regard to non-inferential perceptual thought, experience is what plays this justificatory role. The upshot is that it seems reasonable to approach a critical investigation of non-conceptualist positions equipped with an understanding of perceptual experience as rationally significant. Yet if, following non-conceptualists, we represent perceptual experience as involving the reception of non-conceptual, merely causally delivered content, we construe it as bereft of normative

structure, and it is not evident how it can have the rational significance for perceptual thought that it seems to have while lacking any normative organization of the sort that would enable it to fill this office. That is a thumbnail sketch of a reconstructed Wittgensteinian case for thinking that non-conceptualists place internally inconsistent conditions on what perceptual experience is like – and that their stance therefore ultimately needs to be abandoned as untenable.

Contemporary debates about the prospects for a conceptualist account of perceptual experience are involved, and many philosophers maintain that there are insurmountable obstacles to a viable conceptualism. But in fact the apparently most serious objections to conceptualism (viz., objections having to do with whether it can account for the perceptual capacities of babies and animals) can be decisively answered.⁵⁹ Granted that this is so – and granted that non-conceptualist accounts of perception are the best case for making sense of the idea of an obligation to abstract – it follows that there's a powerful case to be made for abandoning this idea as bankrupt.

This conclusion is of interest insofar as the idea of obligatory abstraction is what seems to force us to whittle away from our conception of the world all qualities with a necessary reference to affect – and to, by this route, arrive at an image reality as in itself bereft of ethical values. Forfeiting this idea in a genuinely consistent manner is tantamount to conceding that we don't have a coherent enough account of what ideally abstract mental access to the world would be like to appeal to such access in antecedently impugning the cognitive credentials of non-abstract modes of thought. It is tantamount to conceding that we are not in a position to determine in advance that, any time we allow non-abstract or subjectively shaped considerations to inform our thought and speech, we thereby undermine our claim to do justice to how things really are. The result of our attempt to discredit the idea of ideal abstraction is thus that we are obliged to refashion our understanding of objective reality so that it no longer excludes everything subjective. It is a short step

⁵⁹ For an argument to this effect, see Cray (2012). An expanded version of this materials is presented in Cray (2016: Chapter 3).

from here to accommodating within the objective realm the ethically non-neutral qualities that Winch urges us to see as objects of social understanding.⁶⁰

If we now allow that some objective qualities are as such ethically charged, we at the same time allow that modes of thought that shape our ethical sensibilities may as such directly contribute to our grasp of objective features of the world, thereby qualifying as rationally authoritative. By elaborating Winch's Wittgensteinian case for his suggestive and philosophically unorthodox social ontology, we accordingly equip ourselves to accommodate the wider conception of rationality that – as left Hegelian critical theorists urge – we require in order to make sense of social criticism that is rationally authoritative without being ethnocentric. Or, in other words, we equip ourselves to account for the rational authority of critical gestures – such as those characteristic of Crenshaw and, indeed, many other radical social critics – that essentially involve bringing us to look at our lives from new evaluative perspectives.⁶¹

4. Extending the Argument

There is a decisive respect in which the foregoing account of liberating social criticism needs to be supplemented. What drives the idea that we need widely rational modes of social criticism, both in a left Hegelian strand of Critical Theory highlighted and in a Winchian strand of thought from analytic philosophy of the social sciences, is the conviction that social phenomena are irreducibly ethical and that they therefore reveal themselves to non-neutral modes of thought that only a wider conception equips us to recognize as rational. These are not, however, the only values that responsible social criticism needs to register. There are aspects both of human lives and of the

⁶⁰ There is an extensive literature – one focused on a disanalogy between values and perceptual qualities – that is concerned with the thought that, even if we show that the objective realm includes qualities that count as subjective because they have essential reference to perceptual responses, there are special and additional a priori obstacles to representing the objective realm as including values or qualities that count as subjective because they have essential references to not to perceptual but to affective responses. The idea of such obstacles is, however, suspect. For discussion, see Crary (2007: Ch. 1).

⁶¹ The idea that critical gestures that mobilize evaluative perspectives can as such directly inform rational understanding is, according to the persuasive line of thought developed in Mills (1998), a common thread uniting Marxist, feminist and Black epistemologies.

lives of non-human animals, that despite not qualifying as social, likewise necessarily encode values. The Winchian argument for the irreducibly ethical character of social phenomena starts from an understanding of social activities as modes of fully conceptual or rational expression, and it is possible to show that there are values necessarily encoded not only in all rational forms of animate life but also in all non-rational forms as well. Indeed, it is possible to show that the Winchian thesis about the irredeemably ethical character of rational human social life is a specific instance of a more general point about the irredeemably ethical character of animate life. We need to insist that social criticism be responsible to valuable aspects of non-rational animate life if we are to ensure that our practices and institutions are respectful both of the vulnerabilities of those human beings who (as a result of, say, congenital conditions, illness or injury) are not fully rationally as well as of the vulnerabilities of non-rational animals. Although showing this is a task for another occasion, Wittgenstein is in fact a good guide to this expansion of the realm of values that are open for immanent critical exploration.⁶² Moreover, this marks another noteworthy point of contact with the tradition of Critical Theory, in particular insofar this tradition is represented by prominent early members of the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno and Horkheimer, who held that doing justice to the worldly circumstances of animals as well as human beings called for affectively saturated “aesthetic reflection” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 209). So, even bearing in mind the need to further develop this article’s main line of argument in the manner just adumbrated, it is appropriate to credit Wittgenstein with ‘going to Frankfurt and finding something useful to say’.⁶³

⁶² For a detailed treatment of these themes, see Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of Crary (2016). For further discussion of the case of cognitively disabled human beings, see Crary (2018a); for further discussion of the case of animals, see Crary (2018b).

⁶³ I first drafted this article in the fall of 2015 when I was preparing to co-teach – with Rahel Jaeggi – a graduate seminar on overlapping themes in Critical Theory and classic Anglo-American philosophy of the social sciences (“The Case for Critique”, New School for Social Research, spring 2016). I am indebted to Jaeggi for many productive and enjoyable conversations in the months leading up to and during our joint course, and I am likewise indebted to the students in the seminar for many thoughtful and intellectually intense discussions of these matters. I presented earlier versions of the article at a workshop on “Social Justice and Ideology” at MIT, at a conference on “Doing Ethics after Wittgenstein”

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at the Ethik-Zentrum-Institut für Sozialethik at the Universität Zürich in Switzerland and at a conference on “Truth, Politics and Metaphysics: Celebrating the Work of Peter Winch” at King’s College London in the UK, and I circulated a version of the article for discussion at a workshop on “Dialectics of Progress: Critical Theory and Social Change” at the New School for Social Research. I am grateful for the helpful feedback I received on all of these occasions. At the New School workshop, I benefited above all from an insightful, generous and detailed commentary by Steven Lukes. I also owe special thanks to Gisela Bengtsson, Jay Bernstein, Cora Diamond, Sally Haslanger, Nathaniel Hupert, Tove Österman, Simo Säätelä and Mark Theunissen for their constructive comments and criticisms.

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