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One step forward, two steps back: Idealism in critical theory

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Amy[1] Allen's book *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Allen, 2016, hereafter EP) has been widely read, discussed, and criticized.[2] Her harsh verdict on contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory, which animates the debate, is all the more devastating because it is based neither on nostalgic adoration of Adorno's writings nor on over-inflated hatred of Habermas's theory, two well-known sources of severe criticisms of critical theory. On the contrary, Allen's book on the disastrous state of contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory fascinates because it is based on sympathy, even fondness, for those theories which she criticizes, especially Habermas's. Most prominent in the unfolding debate have been two strands of Allen's complex argumentation, namely her critique of founding critical theory's normativity on backward-looking progress ("progress as a fact," see EP, pp. 11—13) and her charge of Eurocentrism against Habermas, Honneth, and Forst. This is not surprising, given that these two criticisms feature in the book's title.

Yet there is a third strand in Allen's book that demonstrates her fondness of Frankfurt School critical theory, brings into view the full force of her critique, and allows us to examine and extend it one step further. This third strand is Allen's concern for an adequate conceptualization of reason's intertwinement with power, and I argue that it really is the backbone of her argumentation that organizes the other two more prominent strands. On my interpretation, Allen returns us to the core of the discontinued yet unfinished debate of the 1980s and early 1990s about the relationship between normativity and facticity, reason and power, critique and its normative foundations.[3] In her readings of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst, she uses the critique of "progress as a fact" and of Eurocentrism in order to demonstrate that their accounts of reason's intertwinement with power are too idealistic for critical theory (Section 2).

However, I argue that the criteria for an adequate conceptualization, ingeniously worked out by Allen in her combined reading of Adorno and Foucault, are not met by her own proposal. She relies on Anthony Laden's account of reasoning as a social practice but limits its conceptual status by contextualism on the metanormative level. Yet both Laden's account as well as Allen's distinction between normative and metanormative commitments are in tension with her criteria of essentially impure reason and radical self-reflexivity (Section 3).

The reason, I suggest, is that she still starts from an articulation of the problem that is itself welded to a residual idealism. Holding fast to the criteria Allen puts forth requires us to submit to a genealogical critique the very terms in which she frames her critique—specifically the concept of "normativity" (Section 4). What amounts to a small step from Allen's perspective would be a giant leap for critical theory towards emancipation from the clutches of idealism.

2 | CRITICAL THEORIES IN AN IDEALIST KEY

There are two clear indications that the third strand of Allen's book centers on the intertwinement of reason and power and that it really forms the heart of her argumentation: her initial characterization of Frankfurt School critical theory and her criticisms of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst. Allen defines critical theory in her introduction as an intellectual tradition, a (scientific) method and a political project: the heir to Marx's "critical philosophy" that strives for "self-clarification […] to be gained by the present time of its struggles and desires" (Marx, 1975, p. 145). She emphasizes that the method requires critical theory to think the intertwinement of reason and power. With reference to Max Horkheimer's "Traditional and critical theory" (2002), she writes that

> what is distinctive about critical theory is its conception of the critical subject as self-consciously rooted in and shaped by the power relations in the society that she nevertheless aims self-reflexively and rationally to critique. *As I see it, preserving this distinctiveness requires critical theory to hold open the central tension between power, on the one hand, and normativity and rationality, on the other hand*, for to resolve it in either direction would mean collapsing into either political realism or what is now called ideal theory. (EP, p. xiii f., emphasis added)

Critical theory's method is of course not chosen for its own sake but for its support of critical theory as a political project with the constitutive aim of emancipation. However, because of critical theory's method and its insistence on the inseparability of power and normativity, emancipation cannot be achieved through political utopias in the form of theoretically constructed ideal conditions that we should then implement (as normative political theory believes). Hence Allen argues that holding on to critical theory's distinctive method *and* its constitutive aim forces critical theory to adopt a negativistic conception of emancipation (Allen, 2015; more on that in Section 3). Despite this additional complexity, and precisely because of its distinctive method, critical theory furthers this aim better than idealism (as practiced by normative political theory) and positivism (as practiced quite dominantly in the social sciences), proponents of critical theory claim.

Considering its aim, the charge that Frankfurt School critical theory has failed to take into account the work in postcolonial theory (EP, p. xiv f., 1–3) amounts to more than "merely" being Eurocentric. For how can critical theory claim to offer a perspective relevant for emancipation if it does not engage with one of the most important struggles of the 20th and 21st century? Even worse, Allen claims that critical theory *cannot* seriously engage with these struggles because it has gotten its distinctive method wrong: The latest generations of Frankfurt School critical theory do not offer an adequate conceptualization of the intertwinement of reason and power because they fall back into idealism—they isolate reason from power by giving it a (quasi-)transcendental status. Allen's critique of progress aims to demonstrate that Habermas, Honneth, and Forst all rely on backward-looking "progress as a fact" to ground the normative criteria used in their critical theories and that this strategy can only work by divorcing reason from power, by idealizing reason out of history.

The argument just sketched hints at the second indication that the intertwinement of reason and power is the third and central strand in Allen's book and is fully articulated in her criticisms of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst. Although advanced by looking at their reliance on "progress as a fact," the criticisms target the residual idealism of these three authors when it comes to reason. Allen sees all three theorists searching for an immanent grounding of the normativity that underwrites their critical assessments of current societies while avoiding both foundationalism and relativism (EP,

p. 13 f.). Habermas, she says, pursues a rational reconstruction of the capacities of competent speakers in posttraditional societies to secure the normativity of critical theory in the quasi-transcendental ideal presuppositions they must submit to in communication. In comparison, Allen takes Honneth to advance a more historicist and Forst to present a more constructivist account. Without engaging in a full-blown re-reading of Allen's interpretations, a brief summary shows that their common target is indeed the residual idealism in Habermas's, Honneth's, and Forst's accounts of reasons intertwinement with power, that is in their versions of critical theory's method.

1. Jürgen Habermas's version of critical theory sets the stage for Allen's entire book, for it is his "normative puzzle" to which Allen responds: How can we develop "a social theory concerned to validate its own critical standards" (Habermas, 1984, p. xxxix)? Habermas's solution fails, according to her,[4] because his rational reconstruction of the weak normativity implicit in the practice of communication that binds speaker inextricably to the norms of an ideal speech situation (counterfactual but binding nonetheless) is in tension with his problematic theory of social evolution. Since Habermas rationally reconstructs the competences of speakers in so-called "posttraditional" societies, in which argumentation is freed from the bonds of tradition, he must presuppose a specific—Eurocentric—account of the social evolution of these societies. He idealizes reason as it has developed in European societies because it is this form of reason that he rationally reconstructs as providing the universal norms of communication and communicative action. Thus, reason is located in history twice, namely by being embodied in the counterfactual presuppositions competent speakers must submit to in practice and by being embodied in the "progress" of societies that have reached modernity. At the same time, reason is curiously divorced from history—and thus from power—precisely because of the two idealizations that are part and parcel of the very way in which Habermas twice locates reason in history.

2. Axel Honneth (therefore?) weakens the idealization of reason by taking a more historicist (emphatically Hegelian) turn. Yet in order to avoid historic relativism, Honneth claims that the normative principles which we find embodied in "our" institutions are "normatively superior to historically antecedent social ideals" (Honneth, 2014, p. 5). Thus, he grounds the normativity of critical theory in a strong idea of normative "progress as a fact" (EP, p. 108), which leaves him open to charges of Eurocentrism. Furthermore, Honneth (2014, p. 7) uses the idea of normative progress in a surprising manner, namely to tame critique. He argues for a "reconstructive criticism" that identifies the "imperfect embodiments" of those "universally accepted values" that we have reconstructed from our history understood as in fact progressive. This kind of critique can be called "ameliorative," as it categorically eschews criticisms of those normative ideals themselves.[5] Honneth thus interprets historical progress as completed; instead of arguing that the appreciation of history gives us reasons to doubt our own normative ideals as universally valid because it demonstrates over and over again that former ideals never were as universally valid as they were supposed to be, he implicitly sees reason as having fully and finally emerged in history. For sure, the practices in which it is embodied must be perfected, but the principles stand fast. Thus, reason in its contemporary form is curiously idealized, for example, in Honneth's defense of the "irreducibility of [moral; F.V.] progress" (Honneth, 2009) and his bold claim that we have reached the "end of history" in the sense that today, any "normative revolutions," that is changes of the normative principles instead of their institutionalizations, must be regressive.[6] Honneth's normative argument (he also has an empirical one, see Honneth, 2015, p. 209 f.) is that "we cannot go beyond the normative framework of modern societies, as we find the discursive functioning of our Spirit [*Geist*], which is dependent on reciprocal agreement, reflected in that social order" (Honneth, 2015, p. 210). In other words, reason has reached its ideal form; this form can be distinguished from power categorically, and all misdevelopments or social pathologies only show that power distorts reason. Wherever we find them intertwined, we can always neatly separate reason from power.

3. Habermas locates idealized reason twice in history, ending up with a difficult tension between his universal pragmatics and his theory of social evolution, Allen argues. Rainer Forst (therefore?) strengthens the idealization of reason by taking a transcendental (emphatically Kantian) turn. Forst's account of the intertwinement of reason and power begins with a Kantian conception of practical reason, famously seen as the capacity for demanding and providing justifications (Forst, 2012b). Allen's reconstruction shows how Forst resolutely distinguishes the

normative from the social, ending up with "two worlds": the realm of normativity in which practical reason resides and the realm of the social in which this practical reason must be realized in a power-infested world (EP, pp. 159—161). Forst's attempt to account for the intertwinement of reason and power turns power into a normative concept ("noumenal power") by arguing that power is different from violence precisely because violence only acts on our physical bodies whereas power acts on the normative space of reason we inhabit (Forst, 2015). Allen criticizes that this underestimates power's constitutive dimension because Forst conceptualizes domination only as closing off the space of reason when in fact we also need to account for domination as "rule *through* the constitution of the space of reason" (EP, p. 150). The basic problem that hinders Forst from doing so is, according to Allen, that he not only splits the normative from the social world, but also the constructive part of critical theory from its critical part. The constructive (philosophical) part is a theory of justice based on Forst's account of practical reason as the capacity for justification; the critical (empirical) part is the analysis and critique of our contemporary world in light of the norms justified by the constructive part.[7] In Allen's perspective, this is tantamount to leaving critical theory behind, as it gives up its distinctive method of beginning from the intertwinement of reason and power. Instead, Forst ends up doing ideal moral philosophy on the one hand and applied ethics on the other (EP, p. 151 f.).

Although I have not even come close to capture Allen's much more carefully developed reconstructions and criticisms of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst, two points should be clear: First, the conceptualization of the intertwinement of reason and power really is at the heart of Allen's argument. Her critique of "progress as a fact" and Eurocentrism in the works of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst aims to demonstrate how they misconstrue the relationship between reason and power. In each case, Allen's target is the residual idealism resulting from too neat a separation of reason and power, thereby failing to provide what Allen's has argued is distinctive of Frankfurt School critical theory, namely conceptualizing the intertwinement of reason and power in the service of (negativistic) emancipation.

Second, and as a result, Frankfurt School critical theory has taken a step back behind its founders—Adorno and Horkheimer—and another step back behind their forefathers—Marx and Engels. Thus, we find ourselves vis-à-vis the tired idealism of Kant and Hegel while having made at most a small step forward by better understanding how not to justify critical theory. One step forward, two steps back: Is it any wonder that when it comes to contemporary struggles, Frankfurt School critical theory has been rather silent?

3 | ALLEN'S ACCOUNT OF REASON'S INTERTWINEMENT WITH POWER

If my reading correctly identifies the conceptualization of the intertwinement of reason and power as the most important argumentative strand in Allen's book, the pressing questions are of course: How does Allen conceptualize the intertwinement of reason and power? And by which criteria does she judge it to be "adequate"?

My argument proceeds as follows: First, Allen spells out her criteria in her controversial reading of Adorno and Foucault. Yet as we will see, they leave ample room for quite diverse, even contradictory, conceptualizations of the intertwinement of reason and power. Second, we should understand Allen's discussion of Antony Laden's "social picture" of reasoning as providing her conceptualization of the intertwinement of reason and power. Yet it is in tension with one important commonality of Adorno and Foucault that Allen (rightfully) emphasizes: the basic commitment to radical self-reflexivity. Third, I argue that Allen's distinction between normative and metanormative commitments, which is supposed to deal with this tension, does not solve the problem. This mild criticism brings into view a larger issue with her framing of the method of critical theory that relies on a certain understanding of "normativity" as a dimension of the world, not a phenomenon in the world. Therein, I will suggest in Section 4, lies a residual heritage of idealism that critical theory should get rid of.

Let us turn, first, to Allen's specification of her initial criteria that (a) critical theory as a method must "hold open the central tension between power, on the one hand, and normativity and rationality, on the other hand" (EP, p. xiv) and that (b) critical theory as a political project must aim at (negativistic) emancipation. She explicates both criteria

by reading Adorno and Foucault together, arguing that although there are obviously important differences between their approaches, they both share two basic commitments as well as an understanding of the resulting task for critical theory and of its appropriate method.[8]

Basic Commitment 1: Essentially Impure Reason. Both Adorno and Foucault are committed to the essential impurity of reason but do not give up on reason. Since they do not believe that pure practical reason exists, the intertwinement of power and reason is neither a verdict against reason nor a mandate to find an ideal part of reason that escapes power. Rather, philosophy's task is "to reflect on its own rational activity and its entanglements with dangerous relations of power" (EP, p. 187 with respect to Foucault, see EP, p. 186 with respect to Adorno).

An important corollary is that critical theory's distinctive method must confront the "essential tension between reason and power relations, […] not just at the empirical level but also at the conceptual level" (EP, p. 161). Splitting both levels apart (as Allen argues Forst does) must lead to an understanding of reason too idealistic for critical theory.

Critical Theory's Task: Anticipating Negativistic Emancipation. Critical theory's aim for which it burdens itself with thinking through essentially impure reason is neither a description of a utopia nor a contemplation of the good life. Instead, Adorno and Foucault take it for granted that their task can only be fulfilled in a negativistic manner. Their shared idea is to free us at least partly from the contemporary dominant and domineering form of impure reason so that we can get an anticipatory glimpse of what living emancipated might look like (EP, p. 188). Of course, freeing us from the current form of impure reason does not result in finding pure reason, as Adorno and Foucault deny that something like that can exist (basic commitment 1). It means a prefigurative experience of another form of impure reason that allows more freedom in one specific aspect, even though it does not amount to freedom per se.

Basic Commitment 2: Radical Self-Reflexivity. That we find ourselves bound to one or another form of essentially impure reason and still try to wrest from it an anticipatory glimpse of what emancipation might look like requires radical self-reflexivity, Adorno and Foucault agree. We best understand the depth of this commitment and the striking rigor with which they pursue it by attending to their thoughts on historicity. Both understand us to be inextricably historically situated, hence both advocate historicization as a necessary (and perhaps the most important) part of critical theory's method. Yet both complement this assessment, Allen argues, with the self-reflexive insight that historicization as a method is itself a historically contingent answer to our present (EP, p. 164). Only because we live in the modern episteme of history, we cannot help but understand our world and ourselves historically. If we ever break free from this episteme, we should not simply continue to practice genealogy or negative dialectics, as these are rather tools for self-defense in our present historical situation[9] Thus, Adorno and Foucault understand their commitment to radical self-reflexivity to limit the validity of their own claims, to circumscribe the epistemic status of their own critical theories.

Critical Theory's Method: Genealogy as Problematization. Perhaps most surprisingly, Allen interprets Adorno as well as Foucault in such a way that "genealogy as problematization" is an apt description of what they both do. Genealogy uses striking rhetoric figures, shocking images, and disturbing examples in order to distance us from our familiar form of impure reason. Yet this problematization of our contemporary dominant form of reason is no abstract negation of all our normative values. As Allen sees it, "for both Adorno and Foucault, the problematization of our own point of view has a normative point. It aims at a *fuller realization of a central normative ideal of the Enlightenment: freedom*" (EP, p. 196, emphasis in the original).[10]

In sum, the two basic commitments of essentially impure reason and radical self-reflexivity as well as their consequences of a task (emancipation) and a method (genealogy) for critical theory specify the criteria an adequate conceptualization of the intertwinement of reason and power must fulfill: First and foremost, it must be compatible with the two basic commitments. Second, it must explicate how (negativistic) emancipation can be achieved by the method it proposes.

These four points do not, however, offer a full conceptualization of essentially impure reason by themselves, as they leave open too many, even contradictory possibilities. We can see this in regard to one important difference between Foucault and Adorno. In an interview conducted by Gérard Raulet, Foucault, in one of his rare remarks on Frankfurt School critical theory, points out that in Frankfurt, there is still only one reason, whereas in Paris, reason is plural:

I do not believe in a kind of founding act whereby reason, in its essence, was discovered or established and from which it was subsequently diverted by such-and-such an event. *I think, in fact, that reason is self-created, which is why I have tried to analyze forms of rationality: different foundations, different creations, different modifications in which rationalities engender one another, oppose and pursue one another.* Even so, you cannot assign a point at which reason would have lost sight of its fundamental project, or even a point at which the rational becomes the irrational. (Foucault, 1998c, pp. 442 f., emphasis added)

This is in marked contrast to Adorno's and Horkheimer's story of reason in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (2002), in which reason in the singular regresses into barbary:

Reason serves as a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools, rigidly purpose-directed and as calamitous as the precisely calculated operations of material production, the results of which for human beings escape all calculation. Reason's old ambition to be purely an instrument of purposes has finally been fulfilled. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 23)

As we see, Allen's criteria leave ample room for contradictory conceptions of the intertwinement of reason and power. In order to concretize her conceptualization of reason's intertwinement with power, she turns to Anthony Laden's *Reasoning. A Social Picture* (2012) in her last chapter (EP, pp. 219—225). According to Laden, reasoning is akin to casual conversation, which is primarily open-ended: without a telos, be it mutual understanding (Habermas), recognition (Honneth) or justification (Forst). More specifically, reasoning is "(1) an activity or practice that is (2) social, and (3) ongoing and largely consists of (4) the issuing of invitations (5) to take what we say as speaking for our interlocutors as well" (Laden, 2012, p. 10 f.). Allen specifically emphasizes the issuing of invitations and the offer for others to accept our words as theirs. Conceiving reasoning as issuing invitations and not as the unforced yet commanding force of arguments is one way to "take on board Adorno's critique of the authoritarianism of the Kantian conception of reason" (EP, p. 221). For if reasoning is a practice of issuing invitations, its authority lies in its capacity to connect with others, not in its ability to command them. Reasoning becomes an attempt to shape our normative surroundings together with others in mutual attunement instead of individuals unilaterally trying to determine the normative space the others must inhabit (Laden, 2012, pp. 64—76).

Allen's main interest in Laden's social picture of reasoning is of course that reason, understood as a social practice, is essentially impure. It is constitutively intertwined with power because our social practices are shaped by power through and through. Whereas this seems plausible at first sight, we should be skeptical whether Laden's conversational conception of reason really can do justice to its intertwinement with power. Perhaps due to his Cavellian interpretation of reason as a conversation, he seems to restrict the analysis of power relations as well as possible resistance against them to the conversational level (see Laden, 2012, pp. 123—132), as if social struggles and politics would be exhausted by words and as if there are no legitimate question to be asked about counter-violence to structural violence—themes that Allen usually is much more attentive to, although she curiously brackets them in the discussion of Laden's position.[11] Pursuing this criticism would require a far more extensive discussion than I can off here, but I want to register my doubts whether Laden's picture of reason as a social practice really does fulfill the first basic requirement of impure reason.

The question I want to raise instead is whether it fulfills the second basic requirement of radical self-reflexivity. If we take the insight of us being situated historically as seriously as Adorno and Foucault do, so that critical theory's method of historicizing is itself contingent on the historical a priori of history, then critical theory cannot rely on a general, ahistorical theory of reason (or reasoning) such as Laden's, despite its merits. Impure reason is not one thing and never stays the same—it is as much a conversation as it is a fight, as much an invitation offered as a command issued. Taking historicization and self-reflexivity serious means to abstain from the temptation of giving a general theory of reason because there are multiple forms of reason, and any general theory of reason would be tied inextricably to our form of reason.

Laden's usage of "practice" is instructive in this regard. Never explicated, his concept of "practice" or "social practice" gets its content from what it excludes, namely the standard picture of reason as a theoretical activity (see Laden, 2012, p. 9). Yet neither this distinction nor Laden's more detailed description of conversational practices do much to dispel the impression that his conception of "social practices" is rather detached from the material world. Like Wittgenstein's language games, these social practices are safely abstracted from the messy world in which practices have complex and contingent histories—as Foucault and Adorno constantly remind us (e.g., in Adorno, 1977; Foucault, 1998b). Developing a concept of practices that does not violate, for example, Foucault's basic commitment to radical self-reflexivity while still being able to support his analyses along the three axes of knowledge, power, and relations to self is no trivial task, as I have argued elsewhere (Vogelmann, 2017b, pp. 44–46, 62–65). The important point here is that without specifying the concept of "practices" in question, theorizing reasoning as a social practice does not guarantee by itself that the resulting general account of reasoning will be less idealistic than Habermas's, Honneth's, and Forst's accounts.[12] At the very least, we would have to weaken the epistemological status of Laden's account of reasoning as provisional, as a "ladder" in Wittgenstein's sense that we must throw away once we have climbed it (Wittgenstein, 2001, 6.54) because we will then be able to see how it is still rooted in the very picture from which it helped us escape.[13]

Allen could respond that this is precisely what her distinction between normative and metanormative commitments of critical theory does. It provides the conceptual resource, she could claim, for justifying theoretical positions while holding on to the basic commitment of radical self-reflexivity. For the distinction shows us that the epistemic humility required by the commitment can be met without succumbing to skepticism. Thus, Allen (EP, pp. 209–219) models her answer to the question how to navigate critical theory safely through the twin cliffs of foundationalism and relativism on epistemic contextualism (or coherentism, if we use Linda Alcoff's term). Here is how Allen uses the distinction:

> We could understand ourselves, at a first-order, substantive normative level, to be committed to the values of freedom, equality, and solidarity with the suffering of others, but understand these commitments, at the metanormative level, to be justified immanently and contextually, via an appeal to specific historical context rather than via an appeal to their putatively context-transcendent character. Such a metanormative contextualism offers a better way of instantiating the virtues of humility and modesty that are required for a genuine openness to otherness. [...] In other words, we advance our normative commitments with a fundamental modesty or humility about the justificatory status of those commitments [...]. (EP, p. 211)

In order to assess this distinction and the argument it supports, let us note that metanormative commitments are commitments about our normative commitments and that they are normative as well: they tell us how we *should* understand our normative commitments. If instead we understand metanormative commitments as nonnormative descriptions of our normative commitments, it would simply be a fact that our normative commitments are only contextually justified, and any belief to the contrary would be false. Apart from the burden of proof such a conception would have to shoulder vis-à-vis the attempts, for example, by Habermas, Honneth, and Forst, that the justification for their normative commitment can indeed be context-transcendent, taking the metanormative level to be purely descriptive would raise the question why we should not try to overcome this particular metanormative fact. Allen's use of the distinction to advocate humility seems to presuppose metanormative *commitments*, not just metanormative *descriptions*. If that is correct, then metanormative commitments are normative commitments of a special kind, namely normative commitments about normative commitments. Metanormative contextualism thus is a normative commitment that urges us to understand our first-order normative commitment as justified contextually. Hence, the account of reason given by Laden's social picture of reasoning should be understood not as a general and ahistorical account of reason but as an account of impure reason that is tied to our historical a priori today. The worry that I expressed about the theoretical form Laden's account takes would then be baseless.

Yet again it is the basic commitment to radical self-reflexivity that causes trouble, this time for Allen's response to my objection. Conceptually, the combination of radical self-reflexivity and a distinction between normative and metanormative commitments either results in an infinite regress or collapses. Metanormative commitments are normative commitments about the status of normative commitments—so are normative commitments about the status of metanormative commitments meta-metanormative commitments? If they are, we enter an infinite regress, as the basic commitment to radical self-reflexivity forces us to question the status of our metanormative commitments.[14] We might resist the argument by postulating that the status of metanormative commitments is necessarily the status they attribute to normative commitments, for they are, after all, also normative statements themselves. Yet then the distinction collapses because contextualism on the meta-normative level would not be distinguishable from contextualism on the normative level. This is the right conclusion to draw, I believe. Just as metaphilosophy still is philosophy,[15] normativity, and metanormativity cannot be neatly separated. If we are contextualists on the normative level, we are contextualists on the metanormative level as well (and vice versa).

The point becomes even clearer if we switch perspectives and concentrate on the effects of our metanormative commitments. For if they would not modify our normative commitments in any way, why bother with them? Their function is, after all, to ensure a willingness to unlearn, an openness to be shown that the normative principles we defend (e.g., freedom and equality) are not the ideals we took them to be. A metanormative contextualism about their justification must lead to a contextualistic way of putting forward these principles—with humility, as Allen says. Hence, we should be contextualists on both (or all) levels.

Finally, neither Williams (2001) nor Alcoff (1996), on whose accounts Allen models her distinction, distinguish between two separate levels (epistemic and meta-epistemic, in their case). Instead, they argue directly that contextualism (or coherentism), while obviously avoiding foundationalism, does not lead to relativism. According to Williams, relativism is avoided because it presupposes the global context for judgements about knowledge in general that contextualism shows not to exist (Williams, 2001, pp. 226–228). According to Alcoff, relativism is comprised of two claims, namely that truth is plural *and* that we therefore must regard these plural truths indifferently, but that coherentism or contextualism is only committed to the plurality of truth, not to the indifference of the many truths (Alcoff, 1996, pp. 179–188, 214–220). Quite to the contrary, contextualism cares a lot about their differences. Thus, Alcoff and Williams present arguments for a thoroughgoing contextualism or coherentism without isolating contextualism on a metalevel.

According to my argument, the distinction between the normative and the metanormative commitments of critical theory cannot support Allen's argument how to weaken Laden's general account of reasoning. The basic commitment to radical self-reflexivity demands that the theoretical form of such an account must itself be modified. In this respect, the criticism is mild because Allen does not need the distinction but a fuller account of the intertwinement of reason and power that is compatible with the basic insight of radical self-reflexivity—and that requires going further into the territory of political epistemology, I submit, which Allen enters only hesitantly in her book. This mirrors a curious hesitancy of Frankfurt School critical theory that once began with the insight that social theory without epistemology becomes dogmatic and that epistemology without social theory is idealistic, as Adorno's lectures on epistemology as well as the notes of discussions between Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1930s demonstrate (Horkheimer, 1985, part 5; Adorno, 2018). Yet it seems as if Habermas's *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1971) was the last serious attempt to think in this direction—an attempt that he quickly abandoned. The neglect of political epistemology in Frankfurt School critical theory ever since is all the more curious given that critical theory claims that emancipation partly depends doing theory differently—a political-epistemological claim if there ever was one.

4 | NORMATIVITY AS A NEO-KANTIAN FIGHTING CREED

So far, my reading of Allen's book in terms of the third argumentative strand is a plea for her to write the next book on her account of the intertwinement of reason and power. However, I have also argued that we need to be mindful of

what *form* of critical theory we choose in order to honor not just the basic commitment of essentially impure reason but also the basic commitment of radical self-reflexivity. The latter is not defended well by the distinction between normative and metanormative commitments, which I have argued should be abandoned. In fact, I want to close with a proposal to go one step further: Our commitment to radical self-reflexivity should make us question the philosophical paradigm of "normativity" more generally. We need a genealogy of "normativity" that enables us to break free from its stranglehold on us, in order to recognize the residual idealism in the very idea of accounting for critical theory's normative foundations.

This surely sounds grandiose if not ridiculous. How could we question "normativity" in general? After all, this "chief term" of philosophy, as Peter Railton (2000, p. 1) calls it, singles out that which does not merely exist but that, the existence of which includes a claim to validity. We use "normativity," that is to say,

> to mark a distinction, not between the good and the bad (or between the right and the wrong, the correct and the incorrect), but rather between the good-or-bad (or right-or-wrong, …), on the one hand, and the actual, possible, or usual, one the other. (Railton, 2000, p. 1)[16]

How could we abandon such a fundamental dimension of the world?

A first step towards an answer consists quite pedestrian in noticing that using "normativity" in this way—namely as a paradigm in Thomas Kuhn's sense: as a perspective on the world instead of a phenomenon in the world[17]— has a surprisingly short history.[18] Frederick Beiser (2009) argues that "normativity" as a paradigm first gained currency in 19th century neo-Kantianism. Beiser specifically names Wilhelm Windelband (1848—1915), Heinrich Rickert (1863—1936), and Emil Lask (1875—1915)[19] as those who most persistently tried to understand German idealism from a perspective founded on the distinction between the normative and the nonnormative—tried and failed, Beiser claims. He reconstructs their philosophical projects as small dramas, namely heroic but futile attempts to distinguish rigorously between normativity and facticity while still being able to explain the effects of the one in the realm of the other. Beiser tells this history of "normativity" in 19th century neo-Kantianism as a cautionary tale to warn us that similar attempts undertaken today will fail for the same reasons:

> The many champions of the normative interpretation of German idealism—Henry Allison, Robert Brandom, Robert Pippin, Terry Pinkard, Charles Larmore, to name a few—do not seem to realize that this interpretation is very old, and that it has been worked out before with greater sophistication and subtlety. What is even more troubling, however, is that past labourers in the vineyards of normativity discovered serious problems with this interpretation—problems so deep that they, in good conscience, abandoned it. (Beiser, 2009, p. 10)[20]

Even without being able to discuss Beiser's account more fully, we can use these elements of a philosophical genealogy of "normativity" as the "chief term" of philosophy in order to see that the distinction "normativity" makes is not an ahistorical distinction between natural kinds, waiting from the beginning of time to finally be discovered by some German philosophers. Instead, we should understand "normativity" to be an invention (Nietzsche, 1999), a conceptual innovation (Geuss, 2008, pp. 42—50) of great importance. Since it needs to be invented, it is not surprising that Windelband, Rickert, and Lask all attribute the distinction to the same source, namely Hermann Lotze (1816—1881).[21] He first argued that "validity" is a distinctive dimension of our reality and popularized this idea in the 19th century (see Schnädelbach, 1984, pp. 169—180). In the third book of his *Logic*, Lotze asks what kind of truths we can hope for given the volatility of all that is (i.e., being). Discussing Plato's solution (which Lotze rejects), he distinguishes four ways of speaking about "reality."

> For we call a thing Real which is, in contradistinction to another which is not; an event Real which occurs or has occurred, in contradistinction to that which does not occur; a relation Real which obtains, as

opposed to one which does not obtain; lastly we call a proposition Really true which holds or is valid as opposed to one of which the validity is still doubtful. (Lotze, 1884, p. 439)

Lotze reduces these four senses of calling something real to a binary distinction between reality as mere existence and reality as being valid, for these two ways of being are irreducible, he claims: neither can be explained and further questioning is futile. Here is where we reach bedrock and our spade turns:

As little as we can say how it happens that anything is or occurs, so little can we explain how it comes about that a truth has Validity; the latter conception has to be regarded as much as the former as ultimate and underivable, a conception of which everyone may know what he means by it, but which cannot be constructed out of any constituent elements which do not already contain it. (Lotze, 1884, p. 440)

In today's philosophical parlance: Its norms all the way down because normativity is not reducible to nonnormative facts.

It is notoriously problematic to date the emergence of a thought. Do I really want to claim that Lotze is the first to voice the idea of an independent, irreducible realm of validity? No, but I do want to claim that "normativity" as a paradigm is indeed a child of 19th century neo-Kantianism that interpreted Lotze's distinction.[22] Without being able to argue fully for it here, I would suggest that we should not analyse the innovation and transformation of Lotze's account of "validity" to the paradigm of "normativity" in isolation. Instead, we should consider this development by writing the genealogy of the conflicts in which the notion of validity was coined. For "validity" becomes especially important in two struggles in the 19th century: Lotze uses "validity" to stake philosophy's territory, to establish a strict border-regime against the sciences, so that philosophy's existence may be guaranteed. In this first struggle, validity is invented within what Schnädelbach (1984, p. ix and pp. 91—108) has called the "identity-crisis of German philosophy after Hegel."[23] For Windelband, Rickert and Lask, "validity" is a fighting creed, too, but is now directed against an enemy within philosophy, namely "life-philosophy [*Lebensphilosophie*]"[24] as represented by Wilhelm Dilthey or Friedrich Nietzsche. In this second struggle, "validity" serves again as a strict demarcation of philosophy, yet this time, the border is threatened from within philosophy.[25]

Based on a genealogy of the conflicts in which "validity" emerged and grew into the paradigm of "normativity," we could identify the struggle within critical theory between accounts that insist on providing normative foundations for critique and those that insist on a critique of normative foundations as a spawn of these much older conflicts. In fact, just as we can identify "normativity" as a descendant of validity in 19th century neo-Kantianism, the lowly ancestors of its rival paradigm of genealogy were the sworn enemies of the 19th century neo-Kantians, namely life-philosophers (*Lebensphilosophen*). Following a historical hypothesis postulated by Volker Schürmann (2011), we can identify the constitutive idea of life-philosophy, namely that "life is inscrutable" and thus never exhausted by discursive knowledge of life, in the tradition of "practice theory." It shows up, for example, in Bourdieu's arguments against the "scholastic fallacy" or Althusser's formula of "class struggle in philosophy." For both arguments are based on the two convictions that philosophy, if it abstracts from the performance of practices, would strip away the contingency therein, and that this contingency is partly constitutive of these practices (Schürmann, 2011, p. 14 f.). Hence, "practice," like "life," cannot be understood in purely discursive knowledge.

Although I cannot present more details of this genealogical inquiry into the very concepts in which critical theory today thinks about itself here (but see Vogelmann, forthcoming), this would be of utmost importance. We need to rethink how—with what concepts—we frame the questions that we ask about critical theory, and my tentative remarks indicate what we presuppose by asking about the normative foundations of critical theory. In this respect, the formulation of Allen's subtitle already might ensnare us in the conceptual traps of a neo-Kantian idealism that she shows to have detrimental effects on contemporary critical theory. Hence, if we want to conceptualize the intertwinement of reason and power without plunging into idealism, we should start by rethinking the very basic concepts with which

we attempt this task. To do so, we will have to question even whether the very struggle between genealogical critical theory and normative critical theory is still informed by the front lines drawn in the 19th century.

Does the genealogy of "normativity" return us to the radical critique of reason of Adorno and Foucault, the aporias of which started the search for normative foundation? The worry is understandable but unfounded, as it presupposes precisely the stark alternative the genealogy undermines. On the one hand, it is not "normativity" per se but "normativity" as a paradigm that is the target of the genealogical critique; what is undermined is the Lotzian presupposition that there is a second form of reality that offers us a secure foundation for judgements about the other, nonnormative reality—a backworld if there ever was one. On the other hand, Allen conclusively demonstrates how unhelpful our attachment to this paradigm is and how little we lose by abandoning it. My genealogical sketch merely follows through Allen's proposal for a radical self-reflexive genealogy—with consequences for both Allen and her opponents:

Regarding Habermas's, Honneth's and Forst's accounts of critical theory, the genealogy of "normativity" as a paradigm undermines their demand for "normative yardsticks" that sets them apart from earlier Frankfurt School critical theory, but also from poststructuralism. By taking away the idealist notion of normativity used to police alternative forms of critique, the genealogy of "normativity" pluralizes critical theory, turning "measuring critique" into just one among many pictures of critique (see Vogelmann, 2017a).

Regarding Allen's account of critical theory, the genealogy of "normativity" as a paradigm partially turns her criticisms against herself. I have already argued that holding fast to the commitment to essentially impure reason requires a different account of reason's intertwinement with power than Laden's. Yet the genealogy of "normativity" also undermines Allen's account of Adorno's and Foucault's "normative inheritance of modernity" (EP, pp. 195—198), namely realizing freedom more fully. Without the neo-Kantian backworld of "normativity" as a paradigm, there is no transhistorical value "freedom," and in the light of post- and de-colonial work, we should certainly not weld freedom to the problematic concept of modernity (see, e.g., Bhambra, 2007; Mignolo, 2011). Furthermore, there is significantly less agreement on "freedom" between Foucault and Adorno than Allen suggests. Foucault, after all, argues that freedom is not a universal that can be realized to different degrees at different times.[26] It is precisely such supposedly indispensable values that critical theory must submit to its genealogical critique. Horkheimer (2002, p. 207) argued that critical theory should be deeply suspicious of self-evident categories like "freedom", and Wendy Brown's (2018) genealogy of "authoritarian freedom" serves as a powerful reminder why.

However, the main thrust of my argument is to intensify Allen's critique, not to oppose it. We should indeed give up the idealistic "program of justification" (Freyenhagen, 2017, p. 1) for a humbler critical theory—because it would, at the same time, be more radical. It would allow us to recognize that critique does not need a sovereign epistemic standpoint but could be more versatile, moving along as it moves us. It would allow Frankfurt School critical theory to return to its discontinued work on a nonsovereign political epistemology, making it much easier to engage in dialogues with postcolonial, feminist or critical race theory. Finally, it would take up Horkheimer's (2002) unfinished task to explicate critical theory as a theory different from both positivism and idealism.[27]

None of these prospects are already realized—yet all of them are hindered by the idealism in contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory. For those who have ventured with Allen so far, it would be just a small step to also rid themselves of the residual idealism in Allen's critique. For Frankfurt School critical theory, it would finally be one giant step forward.

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Notes

[2] Just the tip of the iceberg: Jay (2019); Sharpe (2019); Azmanova et al. (2018); Frumer (2017); Kramer (2017); Leeb, Nichols, Winter, and Allen (2018); Sheth (2017); Telios (2017); Hedrick (2016).

[3] These are related but not equivalent formulations, which designate not one issue but allude to several distinctive ways in which we can understand what the debate was about—for this understanding was contested throughout the debate itself.

[4] As I cannot fully discuss Allen's interpretation here, let me just note that while I think Allen is right in diagnosing an unresolved tension between the universal formal pragmatics and Habermas's theory of modernity, I also believe that she underestimates quite how much Habermas relies on formal pragmatics and its claims of quasi-transcendental norms as the "grammar" of our social practices (in Wittgenstein's sense); see, for example, Habermas (2003).

[5] Honneth's position is actually a bit more complicated, as he distinguishes two types of normative progress in history: the incremental universalization of normative principles and normative revolutions that replace these ;principles with completely different ones; see, for example Honneth (2003, pp. 138–142). For a thorough reconstruction and a nuanced critique, see Schaub (2015) and Honneth's reply (in Honneth, 2015).

[6] "[…] we should no longer call for 'revolutions' in the basic normative constitution of our societies. While we cannot *rule out* such fundamental changes taking place, any such revolution would have no capacity for moral progress, and hence nothing to recommend it." (Honneth, 2015, p. 210).

[7] "At the center of a constructivist conception of justice, therefore, stands the justification of a just basic structure, while at the center of a corresponding critical theory of justice stands the analysis and critique of legal, political, and social relations that are not reciprocally and generally justifiable. It requires a *critique of relations of justification* in a double sense, namely, both with respect to the real, particularly institutional possibility of discursive justification and (in terms of discourse theory) with regard to allegedly 'generally' accepted and acceptable results, that in truth are missing a sufficient grounding." (Forst, 2012a, p. 121)

[8] Allen actually lists six points (EP, pp. 186–198), but I prefer to combine the last three, as they all specify genealogy as a method of critical theory.

[9] Allen (EP, p. 194) reminds us of two important sentences by Adorno and Foucault: "Dialectical reason's own essence has come to be and will pass, like antagonistic society." (Adorno, 1973, p. 141)—"It's true that history holds a privileged position in my inquiry. […] But this doesn't mean that history has to play the role of a philosophy of philosophies here […]. If history possesses a privilege, it would be, rather, insofar as it would play the role of an internal ethnology of our culture and our rationality, and consequently would embody the very possibility of any ethnology." (Foucault, 1998a, p. 292 f.)

[10] On this point, I am skeptical. At least it should be clear that "freedom" does not mean the same thing for Adorno and for Foucault (see my remark Section 4). In general, Allen's interpretation exaggerates the commonalities between Foucault and Adorno. For less conflating readings which still bring Adorno's work in close contact with Foucault's, see Cook (2018) and Vogelmann (2018).

[11] Especially in Allen (1999, 2008) but also, for example, in her discussion of authoritarianism in the context of her critique of Forst in EP (pp. 136–146).

[12] Think, for example, of the absence of power in the account of practices offered by Brandom (1994).

[13] This implies a conception of critique as a transitional, versatile practice; see Vogelmann (2019).

[14] One reviewer proposed that the infinite regress might be defended as the conceptual price we have to pay for keeping open the distinction between reason and power. Yet the epistemic status of our normative commitments would then be undefinable because it depends on the outcome of the infinite regress. Given that other options are available, I think this is too high a price.

[15] Such doubts about the distinction between philosophy and "meta-philosophy" or "philosophy philosophy" are voiced, for example, by Raatzsch (2000, p. 19 f.) and Schnädelbach (1977, p. 9 f.).

[16] Railton formulation is exemplary. Consider just two similar statements: "I construe this notion [normativity; F.V.] very broadly. I have in mind the whole range of phenomena for which it is appropriate to apply normative concepts, such as correct or incorrect, just or unjust, appropriate or inappropriate, right or wrong, and the like." (Rouse, 2007, p. 48)—"'Normativity' is […] a new label for one of the oldest and most central of philosophical problems, previously approached through a variety of terms including 'value', 'good', 'ought', 'justification', 'rationality' and 'obligation'." (Finlay, 2010, p. 331)

[17] It is precisely the phenomenon of "normativity" in the world that is used as an "exemplar" to turn it into a way of seeing. On this interpretation of "paradigm," see Masterman (1970) and Kuhn (1970, pp. 186–191).

[18] As far as I know, a substantial conceptual history of "normativity" remains yet to be written. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first occurs of "normativity" in English in 1935, in legal theory. Von der Pfordten (2016, pp. 695–699) provides a short, critical history of "validity [*Geltung*]," and Arthur Liebert (1920) a long, celebratory account of the rise of "validity [Geltung]" in the 19th century.

[19] All of them belong to what is usually called the "Southwest School" of neo-Kantianism (see Ollig, 1979). However, Köhnke (1986, pp. 17, 433) cautions that the distinction between this school and the "Marburg School" of neo-Kantianism (including Herman Cohen, Paul Natorp, and Ernst Cassirer, although he is a limit case) is only valid from the 1880s onward.

20 The normative interpretation of German idealism is of course not limited to Anglo-American philosophers or those working in what is now called "analytic idealism." Kant scholars and historians of philosophy of neo-Kantianism also pursue this interpretation (see, e.g., Krijnen, 1998, p. 20): "Philosophy for Neo-Kantians is essentially identical with the theory of validity" (Translation F.V.).

21 Beiser (2009) does not speak about Lotze, who is also relegated to the side in Beiser (2014a, 2014b), although Beiser acknowledges Lotze's historical importance, calling him and Adolph Trendelenburg (1802–1872) the "most influential thinkers in Germany in the middle of the 19th century" (Beiser, 2014b, p. 192).

22 An exemplary statement from Liebert is instructive here: "'Validity' does not mean to abstract from being, nor to negate being. To the contrary, it means almost an affirmation of being, its complement and exaltation over and above the standpoint of bare-faced facticity towards contentfulness or content, i.e. towards validity, that says: being not just is but is valid, means something, does have a meaning." (Liebert, 1920, p. 6 f., translation F.V.)

23 See Vogelmann (2017b, pp. 246–251) for a more detailed argument.

24 "Life-philosophy" is an awkward term but avoids misunderstandings, as it is not identical to the philosophy of life; see the translator's note in Schnädelbach (1984, p. vii).

25 A fuller account would also have to look at a third conflict with psychologism; see Kusch (1995) and Anderson (2005).

26 "Freedom is not a white surface with more or less numerous black spaces here and there and from time to time. Freedom is never anything other—but this is already a great deal—than an actual relation between governors and governed, a relation in which the measure of the 'too little' existing freedom is given by the 'even more' freedom demanded." (Foucault, 2008, p. 63)

27 For first steps along these lines, see Vogelmann (2019).

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