Meeting of the Aristotelian Society, held at Senate House, University of London, on 16 January 2023 at 6:00 p.m.

IV—The Limits of Immanent Critique

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

> This is the illusion of the intellectual—that ideology must be coherent.
> —Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and Us' (1988, p. 166)

I

Introduction. Suppose you want to criticize society. Good! Here's a natural way to go. First, fasten upon some *principle* or *standard* that strikes you as having normative authority—perhaps 'Inequalities are permitted only if they benefit the worst off' (Rawls 1972, pp. 60–1), 'Repression is permitted only to the degree that is necessary for the perpetuation of human civilization' (Marcuse [1956] 2012, pp. 35–7) or 'Prisons should not exist' (Davis 2003). Second, measure society against your chosen standard. Assess whether all inequalities do benefit the worst off (they don't), whether there is surplus repression (there is), or whether prisons exist (they do). Excellent: you have found society wanting. Things are as they ought not to be.

Any such critic faces three major challenges:

> *The normative authority challenge*. The critic appeals to a principle. But not all principles have normative authority. Take Foot's example: *Invitations addressed in the third person must be answered in the third person* (Foot 1972, p. 308). You might try to criticize me by pointing out my violation of this principle. But your critique will lack normative bite. Your principle lacks *normative authority*. I can violate it without doing anything wrong. The *normative authority challenge* says to the would-be

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critic: you must say what distinguishes principles with normative authority from those without.

The epistemic authority challenge. Suppose we grant that *some* principles have normative authority. The epistemic challenge remains. The critic must suppose, not just that *some* principles have normative authority, but that *her* principles have normative authority. But why think *her* principles are those with normative authority? This challenge may be given a specifically political twist: perhaps the critic's principles are *ideological illusions*. They appear to articulate binding claims; in fact they serve only the critic's class interests (Geuss 2016, p. 13; Mills 2005, p. 172).

The practical authority challenge. A principle has practical authority for an agent or group just so long as that agent or group is disposed to take the *mere fact* that some course of action would be to act in accordance with the principle as a (*pro tanto*) reason to so act, and the *mere fact* that that some course of action would be to violate the standard as a (*pro tanto*) reason to refrain from so acting. Such an agent can be distinguished from someone who takes themselves to have reasons to act in accordance with a principle only because they want to (say) avoid social sanctions or avoid causing offence. If a critic appeals to principles which lack *practical authority* for her addresses—if they fail to touch the 'struggles and desires' of their age (Marx 1975, p. 145)—their critique is politically otiose. A critique without practical authority has limited persuasive potential. It cannot yield considerations which its addressees can come to recognize as reasons for action.[1]

Traditions of social critique may be distinguished, at least at the level of ideal type, by their characteristic response to these challenges. Analytic political philosophers typically answer the first challenge with an appeal to something like robust moral realism—'There *just are* some mind-independent, binding principles of (say) justice'—or to some form of contractualism—'Principles get their normative authority by being those to which reasonable agents would assent under certain to-be-specified conditions'. The tradition of immanent critique (from here: the immanent tradition) is suspicious of both such answers, for broadly epistemic reasons. Take first the appeal to moral realism. Perhaps there are mind-independent principles of justice. Absent some account of why the critic has been granted epistemic access to these principles, it seems *dogmatic* for the critic to

[1] These challenges apply to normative standards regardless of their specific flavour. Critics sometimes assume that epistemic norms' authority is more secure than that of moral norms (Geuss 1981; Aytac and Rossi 2022). As an epistemologist, I find this touching but bizarre.

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assume that they have fastened on the correct ones (Benhabib 1986, p. 32). Now take the contractualist answer. Suspicion of contractualism lies deep in the immanent critic's DNA; her tradition emerges, at least in part, from Hegel's dissatisfaction with the contractualist heritage (Benhabib 1986, p. 25). For Hegel, contractualism is guilty of an *epistemic circularity*.

Perhaps there is some situation such that the fact that a principle commands assent from reasonable people in that situation renders the principle normatively authoritative *for us*. But for us to come to know which principles those are, we would first need to know which situation is the relevant one—that is, we would need to know which situation is such that the principles to which reasonable people would assent in *that* situation normatively bind us. But there seems no way for us to work out which situation is relevant unless we already know which normative principles are correct. So we can only use the contractualist apparatus to discover which principles have normative force if we already know which principles have normative force (Benhabib 1986, p. 25, discussing Hegel [1820] 1991).[2]

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

Attitudes to the practical authority challenge also distinguish the analytic and immanent traditions. Analytic political philosophy largely cedes its claim to (actual) practical authority.[3] Rawls, for example, holds that a theory of justice must be capable of having practical authority for reasonable citizens *in an ideally just society*. But an immanent critic wants more: they want a normative standard with practical authority *for us*. For the immanent tradition, questions of practical authority are central. The immanent tradition says: a social critique which lacks practical authority—or some ready pathway to its acquisition—is politically useless.

My project is to work out whether the immanent tradition, specifically, offers a viable template for social critique. I argue that it does not. Here is the plan. I begin by giving with a more account of

[2] One might add: how can we be sure of what reasonable people would do in circumstances so removed from our own?

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

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immanent critique's ambitions and mechanics (§II). From this picture, I extract desiderata for an adequate model of immanent critique. In §III, I argue that immanent critique cannot satisfy these desiderata without committing to an implausible social ontology. This commitment renders immanent critique unattractive on two separate grounds. First, the social ontology to which it is committed is implausibly inflationary. Second, even for those who find unattractive social ontologies attractive, there is a problem: the reliance on the inflationary ontology undermines the critique's claim to practical authority. In §IV, I show that even if we bracket the ontological concerns, immanent critique is flawed on meta-normative grounds.

The broader implications of my argument depend on what else is held fixed. For those antecedently convinced that social critique cannot be grounded in analytic political philosophy, the paper offers a bleak prognosis. If social critique must be immanent critique, and immanent critique is not possible, then social critique is not possible either. Less gloomy readings are available for those who start out friendlier to the analytic tradition. Indeed, the paper might be read as an argument for its indispensability. But I hope the paper will be useful even for those who seek to defend the immanent tradition, by making clear the precise nature of the challenges it faces, and the choice-points which confront its defenders.

II

Immanent Critique. The immanent tradition's signature is its rejection of 'external' normative standards. Instead of appealing to external standards—to an 'abstract ought'—immanent critique 'generates the standards needed to overcome a particular reality from the given norms and the given reality' (Jaeggi 2009, p. 73).

What does this mean? Some immanent critics endorse a *containment constraint*. Social critique may appeal only to principles *contained within* the society under evaluation (Diehl 2022, p. 679; Honneth 2001, p. 7; Stahl 2013, p. 6). For a principle to be 'contained within' a society, its members need not explicitly affirm it. It might instead be embedded within social practices or institutions (Stahl 2013, p. 7; Diehl 2022, p. 679; Jaeggi 2018, p. 104), or the product of an interpretive reconstruction (Walzer 1993, p. 20).

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So construed, immanent critique might seem objectionably conservative. The worry is not that the immanent critic must affirm existing social arrangements. A society can violate the principles it contains. The worry is that the immanent critic can play at most a *reparative* and never a *transformative* role. Consider two eighteenth-century feminists. Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges both demanded that women be educated. Wollstonecraft's critique was *reparative*. She argued for the education of women by appealing to standards that her addressees accepted: educated women, she argued, make for better wives and more 'sensible mothers' (Wollstonecraft 2007). Contrast de Gouges. She appealed to a radical egalitarianism: women should be educated because they are men's equals (de Gouges [1791] 1979). De Gouges does not demand that society do a better job conforming to its extant standards. She demands that it adopt *new* standards. This is transformative critique.

The containment constraint is also at odds with a touchstone for the immanent tradition. In an 1843 letter, Marx wrote:

> [W]e do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one … The critic can … start out from any form of theoretical and practical consciousness and from the forms peculiar to existing reality develop the true reality as its obligation and its final goal. … [W]e do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles. (Marx 1975, p. 142)

Marx tells the critic to 'take his cue' from existing forms of consciousness. But he also urges that the critic must develop new principles *from the old*. Immanent critique proper, Jaeggi argues, is critique which satisfies this Marxian template: it *starts* with norms which are contained within society, but—unlike mere 'internal critique'—it does not *end* with them (Jaeggi 2018, p. 190). Let's make this concrete:

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

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> Second, there is a rejection of the idea that justice requires equality of outcome: inequalities are justified so long as they are the result of talent. But a society which subscribes to such an ideal will invariably produce states of affairs which are unjust by their own lights. The meritocratically successful will pass advantage onto their children; eventually, inherited advantage will be a more powerful determinant of life prospects than talent, and the meritocratic ideal will be violated.[4]

The first critic—the internal critic—presupposes that the meritocratic ideal could be met. It is a contingent and correctable failing of her society that it is not. The second critic—the immanent critic—disavows this presupposition. Any society governed in accordance with the meritocratic ideal, she argues, will inevitably give rise to circumstances which are unjust *by the lights of that very ideal*. The problem is not that we that we don't 'live up to' our ideals. The problem is that the structure of our ideals guarantees that we *could not* live up to them: they 'give rise to effects that are directed against … themselves' (Jaeggi 2018, p. 201).

Only the second critic can satisfy the Marxian template. The second critic uncovers not hypocrisy, but a *practical contradiction*. And by grasping the nature of this contradiction—by understanding how the extant ideal is defective—the critic can engineer a superior norm (Jaeggi 2018).[5] On this model, the immanent critic may appeal to norms which are not contained within their target society, so long as those norms have been engineered via a process of grasping the defects of those that are. Hence immanent critique can be transformative.

Jaeggi's model also makes clear the role of *crisis diagnosis*. Immanent critique differs from more traditional forms of political philosophy in having *diagnostic* as well as *normative* goals (Benhabib 1986, p. 103). The immanent critic wants to uncover the tensions and 'crisis tendencies' within their society. This interest is not merely strategic. The idea is not to work out where there are social tensions which might be exploited in the name of a pre-fabricated political goal. The diagnostic and the normative projects are more deeply

[4] I am not committed to these claims. Their purpose is illustrative.

[5] If this procedure sounds underspecified, that's because it is. Can it be fully specified? I'm sceptical. But that's not my focus here.

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intertwined. The critic is supposed to arrive *at* her normative principles through a process of crisis diagnosis. It is of just such a process that Jaeggi offers a template. The practical contradictions uncovered by the immanent critic are sources of social tension, and it is through understanding ('grasping') these practical contradictions that the immanent critic engineers her principles.

For Jaeggi, it is this aetiology which grounds the normative (and perhaps practical) authority of the immanent critic's proposed principles. The immanent critic does not treat normative rightness as something 'out there' (Jaeggi 2009, p. 76). Her principles, she says, have authority, not because they have some special 'normy' quality that they carry with them regardless of social context, but because they emerge as solutions to concrete, historically specific social problems. Properly understood, then, the idea of an external standard has a meta-normative valence. A standard is external to some society *s* only when its (putative) normative authority for that society does not depend on any historically specific features of *s*.[6]

So immanent critics uncover *practical contradictions*. What is a practical contradiction? Some examples will help:

(c) The bourgeois work-oriented (from here: bourgeois) society secures the livelihood and social integration of individuals by allowing them to participate in the (free) labour market. But the bourgeois society is also disposed to give rise to structural unemployment; hence the bourgeois society is disposed to block agents' access to the very form of social integration it promises (Jaeggi 2018, pp. 129, 159–63; Hegel [1820] 1991; Buchwalter 2017).

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

[6] Interestingly, the Rawls of *Political Liberalism* offers his theory of justice, not as some timeless rule, but rather as 'a solution to what [he] sees as a distinctively modern social problem': the problem of social cooperation under conditions of reasonable pluralism (Williams [1993] 2014, p. 328). This is not, writes Rawls, 'the problem of justice as it arose in the ancient world'; rather, it is a problem which emerged only after the Reformation (Rawls 1993, p. xxvii).

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> unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies (Fraser 2016).[7]

On Jaeggi's Hegelian analysis, the bourgeois society cannot satisfy its own standards of legitimacy. Such a society accepts (i) that a social order is legitimate only to the extent that it secures social integration, and (ii) that the proper route to social integration is participation in the labour market. But—so goes the critique—those ideals are such that any society organized in accordance with them will be disposed to generate high unemployment, and hence by its own lights be illegitimate.

On Fraser's (Marxian) analysis of capitalism, capitalist norms mandate unlimited capital accumulation. Capital accumulation requires social reproduction. But a society structured around the aim of unlimited capital accumulation will undermine social reproduction. Because capital accumulation requires social reproduction, this will impair capital accumulation. The society will hence fail by the lights of the very norm—accumulate capital! – around which it was structured.

Critiques (c) and (d) both argue of a given cluster of norms that they are *structurally self-undermining*. The norms of both bourgeois and capitalist societies are such that, when adopted, they give rise to violations of those norms (failures of social integration and failures of capital accumulation, respectively). More schematically: a norm *N* is structurally self-undermining when adopting that norm gives rise to violations of *N*. Uncovering practical contradictions means uncovering structurally self-undermining norms.

For both Fraser and Jaeggi, the immanent critic must target norms which are suitably *essential* to the form of life at issue. Jaeggi requires the immanent critic to focus on norms which are *constitutive* with respect to the form of life at issue (Jaeggi 2009, p. 75). Fraser's ideal critic focuses on crisis tendencies that are 'not accidental, but have deep systemic roots in the structure of our social order' (Fraser 2016). For Fraser, the stakes here are political. Only if the pathologies identified lie in the essential structure of the forms

[7] Cf. Rawls: '[T]he fact of reasonable pluralism … shows that, as used in [*A Theory of Justice*], the idea of a well-ordered society of justice as fairness is unrealistic. This is because it is inconsistent with realizing its own principles under the best of foreseeable conditions' (Rawls 1993, p. xix).

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of life at issue do they indicate a flaw in those forms of life per se—flaws which require 'deep structural transformation of … [the] social order', rather than mere 'tinkering' with policy (Fraser 2016).

Let's start with a truism: immanent critique must be *immanent*, and it must be *critique*. Each half of the truism motivates a desideratum. First, the *no-external-standards* desideratum. Unlike the analytic political philosopher, the immanent critic must not develop her normative principles by way of a priori, 'top-down' reflection. Instead, she must develop her principles by grasping the practical contradictions within the form of life she seeks to criticize. Her account of her principles' normative authority must make some load-bearing appeal to the historically specific features of the society to which those principles are said to apply.

Second, the *normative significance* desideratum. Immanent critique must output judgements with normative significance—judgements that the world 'ought not to be as it is' (Finlayson 2009, p. 15). It is not enough for the critic to show that the norms we endorse are historically contingent and socially constructed (Jaeggi 2009, p. 72). Nor is it enough to 'unmask' (Celikates 2006, p. 34; Geuss 1981): to show that some supposedly neutral practice serves the interests of elites.

We can extract a third desideratum. Immanent critique aspires to be *social* critique. It's would-be targets—the bourgeois society, the capitalist socio-economic order—are not individual agents but complex social systems. Immanent critique must be capable of yielding normatively significant judgements about complex social systems. Call this the *sociality* desideratum.

III

The Ontology of Immanent Critique. The Hegelian says of bourgeois society that it is practically contradictory. The Marxian says the same of capitalist society. Can such observations yield critiques which satisfy the *normative significance* desideratum? Only if there is something *wrong* with a practically contradictory society.

Here's an argument for thinking there is something *wrong* with a practically contradictory society. Consider John. John adopts the norm: *update via conditionalization*. Adopting this norm makes John very nervous about updating his beliefs. Adopting it makes him so nervous that he becomes unable to conditionalize. For John, the

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conditionalization norm is structurally self-undermining. Adopting the norm *brings about* failures to satisfy it. In Jaeggi's language, it gives rise to effects which are directed against itself.

It is practically irrational for John to adopt such a norm. And there is something wrong with practical irrationality. So it is wrong for John to adopt a structurally self-undermining norm. Hence it is wrong to adopt structurally self-undermining norms. But a practically contradictory society is just a society which has adopted structurally self-undermining norms. So there is something wrong with a practically contradictory society.

This argument is flawed. It is true that it is wrong for John to adopt a structurally self-undermining norm. It does not follow that it is wrong for a complex social system to adopt a structurally self-undermining norm. John is an agent. Because he is an agent, he is required to be practically coherent. He must not adopt some end and at the same time impair his capacity to meet that end (at least where said impairment is not a means by which he seeks to realize some competing end).[8] But that is what, for John, adopting a structurally self-undermining norm amounts to. When he adopts the conditionalization norm, he does so because he aims to satisfy it (that is, he aims to conditionalize). But when he adopts a structurally self-undermining norm, he at once aims to satisfy it and impairs his capacity to satisfy it.

The story told about John will not translate to complex social systems. The story about John made two key moves. The first connected *the adoption of a norm* with *the adoption of an end*. The second appealed to the coherence requirements of practical rationality: do not adopt an end and impair one's capacity to realize that end. Both moves are suspect in the context of social systems.

First, when a complex social system adopts—or, more appositely, *comes to be governed by*—a norm, it does not (at least in general) do so because it aims at satisfaction of that norm. Capitalist social formations are governed by the norms of capital accumulation. But a sentence like 'Capitalist socio-economic formations *aim* at capital accumulation' has the aura of metaphor. The crucial connection between adopting a norm and adopting an end, drawn readily in the case of John, founders in the context of social systems.

[8] I won't explicitly re-state this bracketed caveat, but it should be taken as read in what follows.

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The immanent critic might think I am being unduly picky. 'We can easily make sense of claims like "capitalist socio-economic formations *aim* at capital accumulation"', they might say. 'To say it aims at *x* is (roughly) to say that under conditions of normal functioning, it produces *x*'. This sounds sensible enough. But it won't help the immanent critic. First, on the proposed gloss, a society adopts a self-undermining norm just so long as it (i) adopts a norm which (ii) undermines the society's ability to produce *x*, where (iii) the society produces *x* under conditions of normal functioning. But there's nothing *incoherent* about a system with such a structure, any more than there's anything incoherent about a car's engine. A car's engine produces heat under normal circumstances. But it incorporates a cooling system which tamps down its heat production. The system produces *x* under normal circumstances whilst also incorporating components which impair its production of *x*. And that's fine. Once the language of 'aiming' is stripped of its specifically teleological content, and spelt out in functional terms, it can no longer underwrite a charge of incoherence, and so it loses its capacity to ground a normatively significant critique. Second, the proposed gloss would lead to some odd results. Consider the Hegelian critique of bourgeois society. The critique, in effect, says that bourgeois society is defective because it aims at social integration through work, whilst being functionally incapable of realizing said social integration (given its tendency to produce high rates of unemployment). Given a functional interpretation of aim talk, this blend of claims becomes awkward. If societies aim at precisely the sorts of states they produce under conditions of normal functioning, it is hard to see how bourgeois society could both aim at social integration and fail to secure it under conditions of normal functioning.

But suppose, *arguendo*, we are willing spot the critic their aim talk. There are residual problems. It is unclear that requirements of practical coherence have normative authority with respect to non-agential systems. So unless complex social systems are agents they do nothing wrong in violating requirements of practical coherence.[9]

Why think coherence requirements apply only to agents? Consider the following case:

[9] Perhaps social systems are not agents, but ought to be. I doubt it. Regardless, such a claim is off-limits to the immanent critic, given the ban on external standards.

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Expert Panel. An expert panel is asked to give a government advice on global warming. The panel must form judgements on three propositions:

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

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

Q: The global temperature will increase by at least 1.5 °C over the next three decades.

Suppose the experts' judgements are as shown in the table below.

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

Each expert is individually consistent. But assuming the group's attitudes to a proposition are determined simply by majority vote—the group endorses a proposition if and only if more than half of its members do—then the expert panel will come out as having incoherent attitudes (List and Pettit 2011, pp. 45–6).

In *Expert Panel* there is attitudinal coherence at the individual level but attitudinal *in*coherence at the group level. My intuition is that attitudinal incoherence at the group level—regardless of the experts' coherence qua individual agents—is irrational. The panel ought not to believe as they do.

Compare *Expert Panel* with a second case (also from List and Pettit 2011, pp. 45–6):

Opinion Poll. An opinion pollster asks everyday members of a society for their judgements on the three propositions considered by the expert panel. The pollsters discover that although every member of the sample has individually coherent attitudes, at the group level—assuming a majority vote aggregation rule—the sample is attitudinally incoherent.

As in *Expert Panel*, there is attitudinal coherence at the individual level but attitudinal *in*coherence at the group level. But my intuition here is quite different. So long as every member of the sample has

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attitudes which are coherent at the individual level, the demands of rationality are satisfied. The sample's group-level incoherence seems normatively unobjectionable.

Lesson one is that there are groups to which even minimal norms of doxastic coherence ('Don't have inconsistent beliefs!') do not apply. Lesson two is that judgements as to whether said coherence norms apply to a group pattern with judgements about whether such groups are *agents*. The members of the expert panel plausibly compose a group agent. They have the right sorts of *participatory intention* (Kutz 2000, p. 3). There is a thick shared project—guiding government policy on climate change—to which each member of the group is committed. The members of the poll sample less plausibly compose a group agent. There is no thick shared project to which each member of the group is committed. They lack the right sorts of *participatory intention*.

Put together, the lessons suggest that *coherence norms have authority only for agents*. This is bad news for the immanent critic. For it's implausible that either *bourgeois work-oriented societies* or *capitalist socio-economic formations* are agents. Such complex, diffuse social orders look more like ecosystems than they do humans, corporations or clubs. The individuals embedded within them needn't have the sorts of participatory intentions characteristic of group agency. There need be no thick, shared project to which they are committed. (Indeed, one might think that it is characteristic of capitalist social formations that the individuals embedded within them lack such solidary intentions.)

Now for the upshot. Uncovering a practical contradiction yields a normatively significant critique only when the critique's target is an agent (or, at the very least, agent-*like*). Unless complex social systems are agential, the immanent critic cannot jointly satisfy the normative significance desideratum and the sociality desideratum.[10]

[10] It is worth translating this into Jaeggi's preferred idiom. Jaeggi thinks of social practices as solutions to problems. They 'claim to be the appropriate solution to the problem that they confront or that is posited with them' (Jaeggi 2018, p. 133). This means they can be judged adequate or not according to whether they are adequate solutions to said problems. This need not mean importing external standards, because, she thinks, social practices also come with their own tacit conception of what counts as an adequate solution. Social practices can, then, be said to be practically contradictory when they fail, by their own lights, to offer adequate solutions to problems. Such social practices 'aim' at some *x* but give rise to its opposite. My point is this. There is something *wrong* with such social practices only if social practices are subject to norms of coherence. It may be wrong for an agent to aim at *x* but act so as to bring about its opposite. That tells us nothing about the social case unless social systems are agential.

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From a historical perspective, this is not surprising. Immanent critique has its roots in Hegel, for whom human social life belonged to the realm of objective spirit. It realized a form of 'mindedness' not dependent on individual humans' consciousness (Neuhouser 2022, ch. 11). My argument is that, perhaps despite appearance, the immanent tradition of social critique is not detachable from these ontological commitments. The immanent critic turns out to be guilty of what Geuss calls *moralism*: paradigms extracted from the context of individual action—in this case, norms of practical coherence—are—illicitly, I would say—projected into the political domain (Geuss 2016, pp. 42–8).

I'm sceptical that complex social systems are agents. So I am sceptical that the immanent critic can jointly satisfy the normative significance desideratum and the sociality desideratum. Humans are agency over-detectors. We see agency even when it is not there (Heider and Simmel 1944; Barrett 2000). We should be wary of uncritically exporting habits of thought that are tailored to predict and explain human and animal behaviour into very different domains. But I don't have a knock-down argument for the claim that complex social systems are agents. Group agency is complicated. Maybe complex social systems are more thoroughly agential than I allow. Nonetheless, the immanent tradition's prospects are hostage to social ontology. And the ransom is substantial. To pay it, the immanent critic must finance a social ontology on which social systems come out as agential. This comes with two sets of costs. First, there is the question of such an ontology's bare metaphysical plausibility. Second, there are specifically political costs. Immanent critics distinguish themselves from analytic philosophers, in part, via their claim to specifically practical authority. But immanent critique has genuine practical authority only for audiences who endorse its underlying ontological commitments. But these commitments are controversial. The immanent critic's claims to practical authority must be attenuated.

IV

The Normativity of Immanent Critique. How might the immanent critic respond? One kind of response is concessive. It says, 'Maybe you're right that social systems are not agential. So maybe you're right that norms of practical coherence lack *non-derivative* authority for social systems. Norms of practical coherence might still have *derivative* authority for social systems'. For example:

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> Perhaps citizens invariably internalize social norms. Then practically contradictory societies will mean practically incoherent citizens. And practical incoherence at the level of the individual agent is normatively objectionable. So perhaps social critique can piggyback on a critique of incoherent individuals.

This is not appealing. First, it is unclear how genuinely 'social' such critique—whose normative oomph is anchored at the individual level—would be. Second, as the examples discussed above make clear, there is no guarantee that incoherence at the collective level will be mirrored by incoherence at the individual level. Third, it cuts against the historical grain of the immanent tradition. For both Marx and Hegel, modern societies are marked by *opacity*. Social systems function 'behind the backs' of individual citizens, who are subject to norms they do not fully will or comprehend (Benhabib 1986, pp. 237–53).

A second kind of response is aggressive. It hangs tough. It insists: social systems *are* agential in the relevant sense. Norms of practical coherence apply to them non-derivatively. For example:

> An agential ontology is indispensable. We want to hold society responsible for things like climate change. But we can only intelligibly do this if we treat society as an agent.

This is not appealing. We can hold groups collectively responsible without attributing agency. Consider a remote mountain which many people enjoy climbing. The climbers seldom interact with each other and their activity is almost wholly uncoordinated. Surely, they do not compose an agent. But the mountain paths are eroded. Any individual walking on the mountain has a negligible impact. So no climber is individually responsible for the erosion. Rather, the group of climbers is collectively responsible for the erosion. Attributing collective responsibility is perfectly compatible with denying that the climbers make a group agent.

These are just warm-up examples. Concessive and aggressive responses both suffer from a deeper, shared flaw. Both responses claim that the immanent critic can jointly satisfy the *normative significance* and the *sociality* desiderata. But those are only two desiderata. Adequate immanent critique must also satisfy a third: the *no-external-standards* desideratum. Unless it satisfies *that*, immanent critique is not genuinely immanent. This section of the paper

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argues that the immanent critic cannot jointly satisfy the *normative significance* and the *no-external-standards* desiderata.

To illustrate the tension, consider a concessive response which tries to offload the normative significance of practical contradictions onto their social effects:

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

Consider Fraser's critique of capitalism. On her analysis, the constitutive norms of capitalism organize behaviour (around the practice of capital accumulation) in such a way as to destroy the background conditions (the reproductive sphere) which make it possible for those norms to organize behaviour in the first place (cf. Sankaran 2020). Continuing to act in accordance with the norms will produce social breakdown, by producing a state of affairs in which it becomes impossible for those norms to regulate collective activity.

Frustrated Expectations. Societies ought not to give rise to normative expectations which they cannot meet. But societies which suffer practical contradictions have a tendency to give rise to normative expectations which those societies are structurally incapable of meeting (see Habermas 1984). Hence societies ought not to be practically contradictory.

Consider the critique of bourgeois society. The norms of bourgeois society generate expectations in its members: they expect social integration by way of labour. But the society is set up, so the critic argues, so as to systematically frustrate these expectations—they cannot be met within the present social order.[11]

The offloader is subject to a dilemma. She appeals to a principle: '*Societies should be stable!*', or '*Societies should not give rise to normative expectations they cannot satisfy!*' Either she does not claim normative authority for these principles (horn 1) or she does claim normative authority for them (horn 2). Suppose she does not

[11] It is important to distinguish these strategies. Frustrated normative expectations may sometimes be a cause of social instability, but they are not sufficient for its emergence. They may instead be *managed*. Consider the situation of the unemployed within bourgeois society. Expelled from communal life, they experience both poverty and humiliation (Buchwalter 2017, pp. 121–2). Arguably, this need not lead to social unrest if appropriate compensatory measures—material and psychological assistance—are put in place.

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claim normative authority for them. Then it's hard to see how she can satisfy the normative significance desideratum. If there's nothing *wrong* with, say, instability, then the fact that practical contradictions generate instability is normatively irrelevant. Suppose instead that she *does* claim normative authority for said principles. Then she will, like any critic who appeals to principles, face challenges to her normative and epistemic authority. I argue that she cannot, by her own lights, give an adequate answer to these challenges.

The offloader is not vulnerable to this dilemma because of any quirk of the values they appeal to. The structure of the dilemma is perfectly general. Any critic who appeals to a principle can be challenged as to its normative and epistemic authority. Below, I examine two ways the immanent critic might try to answer the normative authority challenge without appealing to external normative standards. Both fail.

One might think the correct response to these difficulties is *particularistic critique*. Particularistic critics say that social critique does not require normative principles. It is perfectly possible, they point out, to know that some state of affairs is wrong without knowing any general principle. One might, for instance, when confronted with an instance of terrible suffering, know of that suffering that it is wrong, whilst knowing no strictly stronger proposition. One finds something like this view in Adorno:

> One ought not to torture: there ought to be no concentration camps. … These sentences are only true as impulses, when it is reported that somewhere torture is taking place. They should not be rationalized. As abstract principles they lapse into the bad infinity of their derivation and validity. (Adorno [1966] 2003, p. 286, quoted in Finlayson 2009, p. 19; cf. Haslanger 2017)

For Adorno, 'One ought not to torture' is a licit response to a particular instance of torture, when it is used to mean something like 'One ought not to do *that*', whilst also labelling the *that* as torture. The same sentence, when uttered as an attempt to say something about all instances of torture per se, becomes suspect.

Particularist critique is an alternative to immanent critique, not a version of it. Particularists give up on anything like a systematic social theory. But even if she is willing to sacrifice a *wissenschaft*, the particularist cannot escape the present dilemma. The particularist still vulnerable to challenges to their normative and epistemic authority. 'She should have responded to that invitation in the third

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person' does not articulate a general principle. But a critic who makes such a claim is still on the hook for an account of her judgement's authority.

4.1 *Practical Authority*. Stahl seeks to ground normative authority in practical authority. If normative authority can be grounded in practical authority, then the immanent critic can satisfy both the *normative significance* and the *no-external-standards* desideratum. Which norms have practical authority is historically specific. So if normative authority depends on practical authority, it can be grounded (thus satisfying the *normative significance* desideratum) in a historically specific fashion (thus satisfying the *no-external-standards* desideratum.) Stahl suggests:

> If one interprets a community as being committed to certain norms … the discovery that this community does [not] conform to … these norms, provides a *prima facie* reason for that community to change … its actual practice. This is for the following reason: if one is committed to some standard, then one has (at least a *prima facie*) reason to conform to it if no other considerations are in play. (Stahl 2013, p. 19)

This is not promising. Some communities are committed to norms like 'Women who have pre-marital sex should be punished'. But it is not appealing to think that such communities have a reason to punish women who have pre-marital sex. Stahl responds:

> The participants within that practice indeed have a reason to explicitly endorse their immanent commitments. It is just a very weak reason, given that there are many better reasons (for example, moral reasons) against it, (Stahl 2013, p. 20)

There are two problems with this response. One is dialectical; one is substantive. The dialectical problem is this. I agree with Stahl that there are moral reasons not to punish women who have pre-marital sex. (I'm not a monster.) But if the immanent critic appeals to *moral reasons*, she appeals to standards whose relevance to social critique the immanent tradition is supposed to contest. On Stahl's picture, immanent critique figures only as an easily overruled sidekick to more traditional normative theorizing.

The substantive problem is that Stahl's response does not succeed, even by its own modest standards. It is false that anyone who is committed to some standard has some reason—however *pro tanto*—to act in accordance with it. Suppose I endorse, for no reason, the

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following standard: *never wear matching socks*. One morning, without thinking, I put on matching socks. Upon noticing the matching socks, do I have any reason to take them off? No. What I *do* have is a reason not to wear matching socks *whilst endorsing a standard that says I shouldn't*:

(1) ¬ ◇ (Endorse *S* ^ ¬ Satisfy *S*)

But from (1) together with the fact that I do endorse *S*, it does not follow that I ought to satisfy *S*. (3) does not follow from (2):

(2) ¬ ◇ (Endorse *S* ^ ¬ Satisfy *S*) ^ Endorse *S*
(3) □ Satisfy *S*

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

(2′) ¬ ◇ (Endorse *S* ^ ¬ Satisfy *S*) ^ □ Endorse *S*.

Can we infer that I ought to endorse *S* from the fact that I do endorse *S*? No. To allow that inference would license absurd bootstrapping. It would be to allow that, once I come (*ex hypothesi*, for no reason) to endorse the norm, I could reason as follows:

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

This is not acceptable reasoning. It allows me to bootstrap my way to reasons to endorse any given norm. The lesson? One's acceptance of a norm gives one a (normative) reason to act in accordance with it only if one has (normative) reason to accept the norm. Practical authority alone cannot ground normative authority.

Stahl might say: the social case is quite unlike your (*eyeroll*) fanciful sock case. When societies endorse norms, they typically have at least some reason to do so. Maybe. But such an appeal simply pushes the problem back a stage. The question becomes: whence the authority of *these* reasons?

4.2 *Constitutive Norms*. An alternative approach appeals to constitutive norms. Constitutive norms contrast with merely regulative norms. Some norm *N* is constitutive with respect to some practice *P* if and only if part of what it is to engage in practice *P* is to be subject to *N*. Consider the norm 'Players must attempt to checkmate

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their opponent's king'. Such a norm is constitutive for the practice of playing chess. Someone who is not subject to that norm—who is not, in some sense, criticizable for violating that norm—simply is not playing chess. Now consider a norm like 'Be polite to your opponent'. Such a norm is not constitutive for, but merely regulative with respect to, the practice of playing chess. It is not part of what it means to play chess that one be subject to this norm. That *N* is a constitutive norm of some practice *P* does not mean that anyone who violates *N* thereby fails to engage in *P*. Knowledge is a constitutive norm of assertion, but liars—who say what they know to be false—make genuine assertions (Williamson 2000, ch. 11).

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

> If someone is building a house and if sheltering from the weather is a constitutive standard of being a house, then she cannot sensibly ask: Why should I care if the house I'm building cannot—because of my shoddy work—shelter its inhabitants from the weather? (Enoch 2006, p. 172, drawing on Korsgaard 2009, pp. 18–26)

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

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

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their opponents as normatively irrelevant (Enoch 2006; cf. Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018; Prinz and Rossi 2017; Walzer 2008)

We can multiply examples:

> That one toaster is better as a toaster than another is only normatively relevant—is only something you should care about when about to buy one of the two—if you already have a reason to get a toaster, to care about the constitutive function of toasters. If you like your bread fresh, and what you're looking for is a toaster-shaped paperweight, or some nice retro piece of kitchen decoration, you may have a reason to get a toaster, but you can remain entirely indifferent to which of the two is the better toaster. And, crucially, there would be nothing irrational about such indifference. The normative … relevance of the constitutive features of toasters is entirely parasitic on you already having a reason to care about it, or about the kind toaster. (Enoch 2020, p. 339)

The constitutive norms of a practice lack normative authority *even for practitioners*, unless said practitioners have a normatively significant reason for engaging in the relevant practice in the first place (Enoch 2006).[12] The upshot for the immanent critic is this. Perhaps it is constitutive of a society that a society ought to be stable.

But the stability norm has normative authority for a social system only if it has a normatively significant reason to be a social system, rather than a shmocial system, where a shmociety is *just like* a society, except not governed by the constutitive norm of stability. But any candidate reason to be a shmocial system must either (i) itself be a norm which is constitutive for social systems, in which case the question of its authority is simply pushed back, or (ii) not itself a constitutive norm of those practices, in which case its authority cannot be accounted for in constitutivist terms.

Enoch's shmagency objection arose in a particular dialectical context. The shmagency objection was devised to challenge those who sought to ground moral normativity in the constitutive norms of agency. For Korsgaard, those were norms of practical coherence. Thus the shmagency objection puts a different spin on the question of whether social systems are agential. Suppose that they are. The

[12] Jaeggi acknowledges as much: '[J]ustifying norms in functional or ethical-functional terms means that they are held to be good for something. However, the validity of such norms within forms of life is established only in the context of a further determination of the purpose for which the practice and the overarching ensemble of a cluster of practices is good' (Jaeggi 2018, p. 114).

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shmagency objection shows that norms of practical coherence may nonetheless lack normative authority for social systems. It may be constitutive of agency that agents ought to be practically coherent. That's not enough to ground the normative authority of practical coherence. The agent must have some normatively significant reason to be an agent in the first place.

4.3 *Responses to the Shmagency Objection*. How might the immanent critic try to rescue constitutivism? I consider two responses: first, the appeal to *jurisdictional escape*; second, the appeal to *normative escape* (Hanson MS, p. 1).

Jurisdictional Escape. Maybe Enoch's case that constitutive norms have at most 'parasitic' normative authority applies only to norms which are *jurisdictionally escapable*. A norm is jurisdictionally escapable for x if and only if it is possible for the norm to simply fail to apply to x, as the norm 'You must try to checkmate your opponent' fails to apply to me when I am playing cricket rather than chess. By contrast, if it is impossible for me to stop, say, being an agent, then the constitutive norms of agency will not, for me, be jurisdictionally escapable (Hanson MS).

One can read Jaeggi as suggesting such a response:

> In contrast to the option of playing or not playing [a game] … participating in social roles often (or even typically?) involves nexuses of practices that are not purely optional for us. Norms of ethical life refer to contexts of social cooperation that—as antecedent nexuses of interpretation and practice—already exist and into which we are incorporated whether we like it or not. (Jaeggi 2018, p. 104)

Normative Escape. A norm is normatively escapable if and only if I can violate it without doing anything wrong *even when the norm applies to me* (Hanson MS, p. 15). An example of a normatively escapable norm might be Foot's norm of etiquette requiring that invitations addressed in the third person be responded to in the third person (Hanson MS, p. 7). Suppose I am in the process of writing a response to an invitation written in the third person, and I respond in the first person. Clearly, the norm applies to me. I am engaged in exactly the activity regulated by the norm. I am nonetheless not doing anything wrong, because the norm lacks normative authority. The normative escape response charges that Enoch illicitly assumes that because (i) the constitutive norms of chess and toasters are normatively escapable, (ii) all constitutive norms are normatively

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escapable (Hanson MS, p. 28). For example, it is arguably constitutive of the practice of friendship that one ought to participate in that practice. Here, the normatively significant reason one ought to participate in the practice is itself a constitutive norm of the practice. For the constitutive norms of friendship to have authority for an agent, then, they need not first have a normatively significant reason to engage in the practice that is 'external' to it.

Appeals to jurisdictional escape fail. To exploit jurisdictional escape, the immanent critic must say that norms like 'Societies must be stable' are not jurisdictionally escapable. So they must say that collectively, we could not give up on playing the 'society' game and play, say, the 'shmociety' game instead. But it's not clear that this claim is plausible. Indeed, it is not, on reflection, entirely obvious that we are *in fact* playing the society game rather than the shmociety game. If we are in fact playing the latter, then the relevant norms are not just jurisdictionally escapable but jurisdictionally escaped. But there is a more serious problem for appeals to jurisdictional escape. That quitting or avoiding some practice is not an option seems irrelevant to the normative status of that practice's constitutive norms. In Margaret Atwood's Gilead, it is constitutive of being a Handmaid that Handmaids must submit to sex with their masters (Atwood 1985). Someone might be trapped in the role of Handmaid, so that its norms are jurisdictionally inescapable for her. Whilst it may (may!) be prudentially advisable for such an unfortunate woman to submit to sex with her master, it would not be *wrong* for her to resist. That a constitutive norm is jurisdictionally inescapable does not infuse it with normative authority.

Appeals to normative escape also fail. First of all, appeals to normative inescapability will expose the immanent critic to challenges to her epistemic authority. Suppose we grant, *arguendo*, that *some* of the norms which are constitutive of our shared practices are normatively inescapable. Still, it cannot be that all of the constitutive norms to which we are subject are normatively inescapable. The idea that *all* the constitutive norms to which we are subject are normatively inescapable is an unacceptable conclusion for anyone who aspires to transform society, as the immanent critic presumably does. (Think also of the Handmaid.) How, then, are we to know *which* of the constitutive norms are the normatively inescapable ones? It is hard to see how the immanent critic can answer this question without

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falling into the 'dogmatism' of which they accuse the analytic critic who appeals to moral realism.

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

To say of some norm *N* which is a constitutive norm for some practice *P* that it is normatively inescapable for *x* is to say that *N*'s authority for *x* is not dependent upon *x*'s participation in *P*. But that is just to say that the normative authority of a normatively inescapable constitutive norm cannot be accounted for in constitutive terms! The immanent critic now faces a new dilemma. Suppose they make no appeal to normative inescapability. Then they have no response to the shmagency objection. Suppose, alternatively, they do appeal to normative inescapability. Then they appeal to norms whose authority cannot be accounted for in constitutive terms. This does not just mean that they appeal to norms whose authority they can give no adequate account of in specifically constitutivist terms (though that would be bad enough). It suggests that *no* account of these norms' authority may be given in terms which satisfy the *no-external-standards* desideratum. For that desideratum requires the immanent critic to ground the authority of norms in historically specific features of the social context at issue. But *ex hypothesi*, the normative authority of normatively escapable norms for *x* does not depend in any way on *x*'s actual practices. The upshot is that the immanent critic has no adequate response to the normative authority challenge.

The immanent critic might say, 'All this shows is that meta-normativity is a tough business. Responding to the normative authority challenge is hard for everyone'. There is some truth in this. Responding to the normative authority challenge *is* hard for everyone. But it is *especially* hard for the immanent critic, given the artificially denuded set of theoretical resources to which they restrict themselves. The immanent tradition swears off the analytic

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tradition's key meta-normative tools, realism and contractualism. The analytic critic, then, has resources for answering the normative authority challenge that the immanent critic lacks.

Let us take stock. For the immanent tradition to offer a model of social critique that satisfies the normative significance desideratum, practical contradictions within social structures must be normatively significant. I have argued that the immanent critic lacks the theoretical resources required to account for the normative significance of practical contradictions. They cannot respond to the normative authority challenge within the confines set by the *no-external-standards* desideratum. Given that constitutive norms lack independent normative force, this result applies regardless of whether one allows that social systems are agential.

V

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

One option would be to drop the *normative significance* desideratum. The immanent critic might settle for evaluative, rather than normative critique (cf. Finlayson 2009, p. 40). I give an evaluative critique of a knife when I say it is blunt, and an evaluative critique of an assassin when I say she is a bad shot. But merely evaluative knowledge cannot guide action in the same way that normative knowledge can. An assassin can know that she is a bad shot. That will not help her to figure out whether she ought to invest in shooting lessons. For that, needs to know whether she ought to be an assassin. If social critique is to guide political action, merely evaluative critique is not enough.

A more radical option would be to place immanent critique wholly within the domain of empirical knowledge. It could be sold as a method for predicting or retrospectively explaining the emergence of social crises. This would be a costly recalibration. The tradition of immanent critique self-conceives as something distinct from 'value-neutral' social-scientific projects (Benhabib 1986, p. 142).

A second option would be to soften the *no-external-standards* desideratum. Any such softening would need to be carefully implemented. A rejection of 'external' normative standards is the immanent tradition's signature. Diluting the *no-external-standards* desideratum

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too much might dissolve the tradition entirely. The immanent critic might try to locate what is special about the immanent tradition in the strength of its concern with specifically practical authority. But I doubt that practical authority alone can do the work of delineating a critical tradition.

The most promising option, I suspect, is for the immanent tradition to key itself to the technique of diagnosing practical contradictions, without committing to any claims as to whence the normative authority of this technique derives. Immanent critique could then be sold as methodologically distinctive without restricting its meta-normative resources. Still, this would make for a significant stripping back of the immanent critic's traditional ambitions.

The lesson? The tensions I identify are not rooted in commitments which the immanent critic could easily weaken whilst preserving their tradition's spirit. The tensions are rooted in core, rather than incidental, features of the immanent tradition. These core ambitions cannot be satisfied. They are, as it were, structurally unrealizable ambitions.

A coda. When I have presented this work, I have sometimes been asked, sometimes in a rather desperate tone, 'But where does this leave us? If you're right about the problems with immanent critique, what are we supposed to do instead?' I have tried to answer these questions honestly: I do not know. But the immanent tradition tells us that understanding past failures can help us fashion new and better tools for the future. I hope it is right.[13]

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