# Irresponsible Critique

## The Concept of Reflexivity in Critical Theory




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# ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies the concept of reflexivity in 'Frankfurt School' Critical Theory. To act reflexively is to attempt to gain a clearer perspective on the partiality and fallibility of one's beliefs in order to become aware of the influence they have on the object of study. This is important for Critical Theories, since they are committed to the view that their research shouldn't just be an academic curiosity that reflects passively upon the world, but ought to contribute to forms of collective change that alleviate unjust social relations. Hence, Critical Theories are characterised by an emancipatory ambition.

I make two interventions regarding the role of reflexivity in Critical Theory. First, I propose a paradigm of Critical Theories that is rooted in the notion of 'reflexive responsibility'. Given the vital role of reflexivity in regulating the conduct of critical social theorists, exploring the relationship between the emancipatory and reflexive dimensions of Critical Theories offers us a perspective immanent to critical social theories from which to evaluate their success. When methodologies are found to ignore or underplay certain features of the social world or fail to acknowledge how social experiences and perceptions are not interchangeable between different people, then such analyses undermine the emancipatory ambitions of critique and must be considered less responsible than if they didn't take these risks.

The second proposal is that reflexive practice is most responsible when we understand it as having an implicit commitment to promoting the epistemic virtue of humility. To *act* with epistemic humility is to engage in a reflective action whereby we scrutinise the foundations of our knowledge and acknowledges the limitations of our knowledge. Without epistemic humility, projects which seek to mitigate social

injustices can end up reinforcing their ideological structures since the theorist is less likely to reflect on things such as the suitability of their methods, the generalisability of their claims to different communities, or how their work connects to the social struggles that their work claims to be in the service of.

Combined, these two proposals of reflexive responsibility and reflexive humility provide a framework to evaluate existing approaches to reflexivity in critical social theories. But, equally as important, they offer a new direction to envisage methods of critique that centre their emancipatory ambitions and offer insight into acting upon them responsibly. Therefore, this dissertation aims to highlight how recent work in critical social theory has proceeded irresponsibly with the view that highlighting this can help us identify more responsible ways of conducting social critique.

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# INTRODUCTION

## *IRRESPONSIBLE CRITIQUE*

# Introduction

## IRRESPONSIBLE CRITIQUE

Connecting the variety of approaches described as 'critical social theories' is a commitment to intellectual work as praxis. Praxis entails that social research shouldn't just be an academic curiosity that reflects passively upon the world but ought to contribute to forms of collective change that alleviate unjust social relations.[1] Researchers fulfil this emancipatory ambition of critique by uncovering the factors buttressing forms of social oppression,[2] and communicating their insights to others in order to collaborate to bring about social change. But to perform research with an eye to social transformation has significant repercussions for the research methods pursued by critical social theories. As the decolonial theorist José Medina states, as individuals, we must avoid behaviour that 'contribute[s] to the invisibility of everyday injustices and desensitise us to the suffering they cause.'[3] Upholding this responsibility is especially important for critical social theorists if they are to carry through on their transformative goals. Thus, underpinning the praxis of critical social theories is a commitment to 'reflexive' scrutiny of their own research methods to avoid reinforcing the oppressive social conditions under analysis.

To act reflexively is to attempt to gain a clearer perspective on the partiality and fallibility of one's beliefs in order to become aware of the influence they have on the object of study. Such a reflexive dimension is essential to critical social theories for

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[1] Maeve Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 6; Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 60-1

[2] Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 209

[3] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imagination,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13

two reasons. First, it is a means of acknowledging the situated epistemic conditions under which theorising and social analysis take place. This helps the researcher appreciate how their opinions are inseparable from the concrete social world and, therefore, liable to distort their interpretation of situations, despite their best intentions. Second, acting reflexively is a testament to the ongoing nature of critical inquiry. The practical aim of critique cannot be satisfied through a one-off occasion of unmasking the roots of social domination; situations change, as do our presuppositions, and this demands that our analyses, beliefs, and methodologies undergo renewed scrutiny in response to what our research has disclosed. Reflexivity is, therefore, an essential means by which critical social theory can be pursued responsibly, as it is a safety-check on whether, in our efforts to fulfil our emancipatory ambitions, we are not, in fact, reinforcing the unjust conditions under analysis.

This dissertation makes two interventions regarding the role of reflexivity in critical social theory. First, I propose a paradigm of evaluating critical social theories rooted in the notion of 'reflexive responsibility'. Given the vital role of reflexivity in regulating the conduct of critical social theorists, exploring the relationship between the emancipatory and reflexive dimensions of critical social theories offers us a perspective immanent to critical social theories from which to evaluate their success. When methodologies are found to ignore or underplay certain features of the social world or fail to acknowledge how social experiences and perceptions are not interchangeable between different people, then such analyses are reflexively insufficient. Perhaps their methods are not rigorous enough, or the analysis is simply too abstract, so they are disconnected from the social struggles under analysis. Whatever the reason for reflexive weaknesses, such approaches take risks that undermine the emancipatory ambitions of critique and must be considered less responsible than if they didn't take these risks. Thus, assessing the potential

consequences of specific methodologies allows us to determine how responsible a critical social theory is by evaluating whether such methods as they espouse would undermine the emancipatory ambitions of critique. The term 'irresponsible' is not employed in an effort to be derogatory. It is an effort to help us understand the role of the critic. By promoting a framework of reflexive responsibility, we should get a better grasp of the critic's role, the aims of critical social theory, and the limits to its collaboration with broader political struggles.

The second proposal is that reflexive practice is most responsible when we understand it as having an implicit commitment to promoting the epistemic virtue of humility. Virtues relating to epistemology – *epistemic virtues* – refer to excellences within our knowledge practices. Humility as an epistemic virtue is a disposition which acknowledges the limitations of our knowledge. To *act* with epistemic humility is to engage in a reflective action whereby we scrutinise the foundations of our knowledge. It also involves acting with openness to the credibility of other people. Without epistemic humility, projects which seek to mitigate social injustices can end up reinforcing their ideological structures since the theorist is less likely to reflect on things such as the suitability of their methods, the generalisability of their claims to different communities, or how their work connects to the social struggles that their work claims to be in the service of. Thus, this dissertation argues that humility on the part of the theorist is essential to conducting an inquiry into theorising directed at analysing and transforming oppressive societies.

Combined, these two proposals of reflexive responsibility and reflexive humility provide a framework to evaluate existing approaches to reflexivity in critical social theories. But, equally as important, they offer a new direction to envisage methods of critique that centre their emancipatory ambitions and offer insight into acting upon them responsibly. Therefore, this dissertation aims to highlight how recent work in

critical social theory has proceeded irresponsibly with the view that highlighting this can help us identify more responsible ways of conducting social critique.

## I. CRITIQUING REFLEXIVITY

My study of reflexivity focuses on its use in a particular tradition of critical social theory, namely, the Frankfurt School tradition of critical social theory. This tradition of critical social theory is associated with the Institute of Social Research, a research centre established in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in 1923 and committed to Marxist social analysis. To distinguish the Frankfurt School tradition from other approaches to critical social theory, throughout this thesis, I refer to the Frankfurt School tradition as 'Critical Theory'. The work associated with Critical Theory gathers together different generations of theorists who have either worked at the Institute of Social Research or contributed to the paradigms of thought that emerged from the Institute.[4] Luminaries include Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Seyla Benhabib, and Nancy Fraser. What unites these disparate theorists is a loose commitment to using the method of 'immanent criticism' to justify their diagnosis that some social conditions are oppressive.

At a general level, immanent critique points to how a diagnosis is always a situated activity: it takes place in the *social world*, uses tools – of rationality – that have been shaped by the particular context, and directs its inquiry to the underlying condition of society. Steeped in Marxian accounts of ideology critique, Critical Theory diagnoses the discrepancies between dominant understandings and perceptions of the social world and the reality of those practices.[5] As Benhabib describes,

[4] For more on the role of theoretical 'paradigms' in Critical Theory, see: Lois McNay, *The Gender of Critical Theory: The Experiential Grounds of Critique,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

[5] Benhabib, 1987, 107-8

> 'Marx contrasts the normative self-understanding of this society to the actual social relations prevailing in it, without appealing to a different set of norms from the ones immanent in bourgeois society.' (Benhabib, 107-08)

But besides the situated aspect of immanent critique, Benhabib's invocation of the method's Marxian heritage should also direct our attention to the important political and transformative aspects of the approach. This can be shown by contrasting immanent critique to two other forms of criticisms: external and internal criticism.

The contrast with the former is starkest. 'External' criticism steps outside of the concrete situations under investigation and judges something against criteria independent of the object, such as a Pantone colour chart or the rule of maximal utility. Such an approach is incompatible with the basic principles of immanent criticism, namely, that normative values are socially development and *immanent* to social life, that is, an 'inherent' part of social reality.[6] We cannot, therefore, appeal to fixed values that are external to our social world.

With 'internal critique', the contrast to immanent criticism is less obvious. Both approaches claim to evaluate something 'on its own terms.'[7] The two approaches are distinguished, however, by the *depth* of their criticisms and the *reach* of their conclusions. With respect to depth, an internal critique identifies a contradiction: between a *practice* and a *norm,* namely, that the practice hasn't fulfilled a certain standard. It assesses the discrepancy between an object's claim or function and whether it meets this standard. Internal critique does not question the suitability of the metric; the method is limited to gauging the distance between normative standard and the fulfilment of this standard by a practice. By contrast, immanent criticism places both

[6] Jaeggi, 2018, 199

[7] James Gordon Finlayson, 'Hegel, Adorno and the Origins of Immanent Critique' in, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, (Vol. 22: No. 6, 2014), 1142-66, 1143-44

the practice and the underlying norm under scrutiny. As Jaeggi describes, '[i]mmanent criticism is as much criticism of a practice in terms of norms to which this practice does not conform as it is criticism of the norms themselves.'[8] This implies a deeper assessment by immanent critique than internal critique.

The depth of assessment directly connects to the second difference, that of transformation. The transformative scope of internal critique is decidedly local: since the standard is considered perfectly adequate, all that must change is the particular practice. By contrast, an immanent critique is directed to *transforming* an existing contradictory standard. Immanent critique does not aim at a richer articulation of a preexisting norm, but works to identify when preexisting norms become insufficient. In this respect, immanent critique is more capable of achieving diagnostic reflexivity since it makes a stronger claim that the contradiction lies within the *standard itself.*[9] A clear example would be whether the inequalities engendered by a capitalist system of economics are in fact just inadequate iterations of the ideal of free-market distribution (a judgement of internal critique), or whether the production the inequality and structural vulnerability are actually endemic to the standard itself, capitalism, and so incapable of reform (insight generated by immanent critique).

The transformative character of immanent criticism is a key difference, 'Immanent criticism is not *reconstructive*… but *transformative*. It aims not so much to restore an existing order or to reinstate valid norms and ideals as to transform them.'[10] Internal critique lacks the context-transcending ambitions of immanent critique. To immanent critique, the standard is not a fixed given, but open to impurity and therefore to change. Furthermore, this change 'transcend[s] the present reality of these practices'

[8] Jaeggi, 2018, 203
[9] Ibid, 190
[10] Ibid, 203

since *all* instances in which the standard applies are claimed to be ripe for transformation. Yet the critique remains immanent since it is nevertheless rooted in the particular situation under examination.[11]

It is this transformative element which truly distinguishes immanent critique from the reconstructive programme of internal critique. Immanent critique epitomises the dual character of reflexivity as a diagnostic and transformative effort which involves ongoing reflection, attunement, and readjustment.

Unlike internal critique, in the process of immanent critique we don't move towards a fixed normative yardstick; rather, the yardstick moves alongside the analysis of society. We don't simply come to acknowledge an inconsistency as we engage in internal critique; rather, we recognize that a contradiction between a practice and it's standards requires that the standards themselves must undergo transformation.[12] This pragmatic rendering of immanent critique takes fallibilism as an essential component of our ongoing process of critique: that we revise our standards when they're proven to be wanting, rather than aspire to reconstruct an antecedent position. The negativity of immanent critique derives from its immanence regarding the realised norm: 'The norm to be realised is not already present in reality as an idea… Rather, this form of criticism is immanent in the sense that it addresses, in a negativistic way, the internal contradictions and problems of crisis that constitute a particular constellation.'[13] This dynamic of ongoing adjustment and transformation is central to explaining why the method of immanent critique complements the political ambitions of Critical Theorists, since it is built on the understanding that our normative values have social

[11] Titus Stahl, *What is Immanent Critique?,* (November 21, 2013). Available: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2357957, 3
[12] Jaeggi, 2018, 206
[13] Ibid, 208

origins and thus are open to contestation and removal, rather than being fixed standards to venerate.

I choose to focus on Critical Theory since it is with the Frankfurt School that the importance of 'reflexivity' both seems to originate and is most associated. Critical Theorists have considered reflexivity central to their method since, at the very least, Max Horkheimer's 1937 essay, 'Critical Theory and Traditional Theory.'[14] As I detail in Chapter One, Horkheimer lays out the importance of reflexive practice to Critical Theory by drawing a contrast to what he calls 'Traditional Theory', a loose term referring to forms of social analysis that proceed in the manner of natural sciences, taking our epistemic practices to be fixed and a given that 'must be accepted.'[15] Horkheimer considers Traditional Theory to be misguided since it ignores the situated nature of social analysis and overlooks how the tool of critique – the faculty of reason – is not a neutral measurement but carries the baggage of the society in which it was shaped.[16] As a result, Traditional Theories are oblivious to how their biases and interpretations might affect their social diagnoses. Thus, responsible theorists must remain critical of the presuppositions they bring to the situation of research.[17] Instead of engaging with the social world as if its variables were under our control, the theorist must develop a 'critical attitude' that scrutinises their own normative, epistemic, and methodological presuppositions. As Horkheimer describes, this involves 'radically question[ing]' and taking an oppositional stance to 'any specific theoretical content' in order not to become complacent to society's influence on our research.[18]

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[14] Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and Others), (New York, NY: Continuum, 1975), 188-243, 218

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid, 201

[17] Ibid

[18] Ibid, 207, 232, and 234

Furthermore, I choose to focus on theorists within the 'Frankfurt School'. It may be suggested that there are significant reasons to resist this sort of narrow focus on a particular 'canon' of Critical Theory; perhaps the most pressing of these concerns is the suggestion that my focus on the Frankfurt School misrepresents the tradition of Critical Theory.[19] I believe such concerns to be misplaced. As I develop my argument, it will be found that my focus on the Frankfurt School is not arbitrarily narrow. Many have discussed, for example, the fruitful similarities between the early Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies associated with the Birmingham School (See Douglas Kellner, 2002). I myself emphasise the similarities between the understanding of reflexivity issued by Max Horkheimer and that promoted by feminist standpoint theorists.

But nor does my focus on the Frankfurt School distort the tradition of Critical Theory; instead, by openly concentrating on this School I am preventing

[19] There are two less fierce challenges that could be levelled at my selection of texts. First, there are calls to reconsider who we include within the canon – or 'generations' – of Frankfurt School Critical Theory motivated by historical accuracy. At one end of the canon, understandings of the Frankfurt School and the 'first generation' often reinforce misunderstandings that the School began with Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Such efforts tend to minimize the contributions of the actual founders of the Institute for Social Research, especially those who worked during the seven years preceding Horkheimer's leadership (1930), a period that emphasised Marxist historical analysis under the direction of Carl Grünberg. They also tend to inflate the institutional role of figures such as Walter Benjamin, who, publishing in the Institute's journal and receiving some financial support, is better recast in terms of his influence on Adorno's thought, rather than on Critical Theory directly (see Scholem, *friendship, Muller Dohm)*. The legacies of canonization within the Frankfurt School also risk underplaying the involvement of later figures, such as Angela Y. Davis and forget her years studying with Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, and Herbert Marcuse. Whilst I acknowledge these problems of canonisation, and concede that my thesis does make use of the generational framing of the Frankfurt School in order to illuminate the influences of the contemporary theorists I study, I don't think my focus of study leads to any radical misrepresentations of the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Rather, it charts how later thinkers associated with the tradition engaged – often directly – with their predecessors. A second challenge that could be levelled against my project is that my narrow selection of thinkers encourages a 'paradigmatic' approach to critique, whilst underplaying an engagement with actual social problems. This concern is expressed best in the work of Lois McNay. McNay criticises contemporary work associated with the Frankfurt School for becoming self-referential to methodological paradigms, rather than the social problems. My thesis's focus on the concept of reflexivity and my exploration through a narrow choice of theorists would certainly seem, on the surface, to do little to challenge this view. However, such a conclusion would not do justice to my project. This is because the outcome of my confined focus is to argue precisely for breaking out of the confines of the Frankfurt School approach; it is on this basis that so much of the thesis places the Frankfurt School theorists I study into dialogue with theorists from other traditions, such as decolonial and feminist epistemology.

misrepresentation. However fruitful the interactions between the approaches to critical theory might be, commentators rightly stress the specific legacies and contexts of these schools and emphasise why they represent different schools of thought. For example, in her own reflections on her working relationship with Herbert Marcuse, her time spent at the Institute for Social Research, and her wider political commitments, Angela Davis makes a distinction between the concerns of the Frankfurt School and the other wider radical theorists and politics of the era (cite: Marcuse legacies). This reinforces the view that we can, clearly separate aspects of critical theory, identifying those theorists who orient their work to discussions within the legacies and paradigms of the Frankfurt School. It is in this vein that I have chosen to situate my study on Critical Theorists associated with the Frankfurt School. This is not because this tradition represent the limits of Critical Theory, let alone its zenith. It is rather because the authors I focus on view their work in relation to the previous generations of the Frankfurt School: there is a direct relation to founding perspectives of Critical Theory as a reflexive theory that has emancipatory goals, as laid out by Horkheimer.[20]

As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, Critical Theorists since Horkheimer have upheld this commitment to some form of critical – i.e. reflexive – attitude. What unites their approaches to reflexive practice is a profoundly cognitive method of scrutiny that concentrates on our second-order commitments in order to uncover their flaws.[21] The justification for this is a shared belief that a person's first-order – i.e. immediate – experience is framed by their second-order commitments –

[20] An expanded version of this dissertation would include an engagement with genealogical approaches to Critical Theory, as developed by Amy Allen and Bernard E. Harcourt.

[21] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 218

i.e. certain values and presuppositions.[22] Given the situated nature of reasoning, there is a shared concern by Critical Theorists that our values and presuppositions could be manipulated and shaped by ideologies and manifest, in the words of Medina, in 'the inability to recognise and acknowledge one's limitations and inabilities.'[23] Thus, what is largely common to the many approaches to reflexive practice in Critical Theory, is the view that, as Robin Celikates states, reflexive practice should focus on the cognitive, second-order blockages that 'obstruct the development and the exercise of reflexive capacities.'[24]

Despite a general commitment to second-order theorising in Critical Theory, the accounts of reflexive practice can be divided into what Jürgen Habermas describes in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) as 'transcendental' and 'transformative' accounts of self-reflection. An account of transcendental self-reflection tries to 'reconstruct' the conditions that make our rational activities possible. Here, the contribution of reflexive practice to praxis is in identifying blockages to essential functions of reasoning and proceeds on the belief that, through this reflexive work, we can perform these underlying functions better. This transcendental approach to reflexive practice is described throughout this dissertation as the 'Kantian approach'. It is explored in Chapter Two through the work of Rainer Forst, for whom self-reflection is directed at violations of a person's fundamental right to receive justification.

The second 'transformative' form of self-reflection is similar to defetishizing critique: it understands self-reflection as tied to forms of consciousness-raising which challenge unreflective acceptance of social conditions by bringing to light their contingency.[25] Common to this second variety of reflexive practice is the view that

[22] Robin Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding,* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 11
[23] Medina, 2013, 76
[24] Celikates, 2018, (Ch. 3, Epub)
[25] Benhabib, 1987, 107-8

reflexive practice requires existing norms and habits of reasoning to be replaced by new norms.[26] This objective of transformative self-reflection is thus a clear departure from the transcendental account of reflexivity since it claims that solutions to problems require new norms, not richer articulations of the underlying condition. Throughout this thesis, I refer to the transformative approach to reflexive practice as the 'Left-Hegelian' variety; it is explored in Chapters Three and Five through the work of Rahel Jaeggi and Celikates.

And yet, as I argue throughout this thesis, neither of these transcendental or transformative approaches to reflexive practice, as found in recent works in Critical Theory, have managed to uphold the reflexive responsibilities envisaged by the critical attitude. I argue that recent Critical Theory's preoccupation with second-order blockages blinds their reflexive scrutiny to the broader and less cognitive aspects of epistemic experience that influence our diagnoses. Throughout this dissertation, I show that our position as knowers is more than just cognitive: it is deeply situated, for example, involving the material location we take up via institutional affiliation, educational status, or gender and race. To make this point, I suggest that both transcendental and transformative strands of Critical Theory would benefit from the light shed on the accounts of reflexivity presented by feminist standpoint epistemologists.

Standpoint epistemology demonstrates how we may avert the risk of ignoring the situated nature of knowledge and the risk of reinforcing the unjust conditions under analysis. The work of Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway sought to respond to claims in the natural sciences regarding the objectivity of things and how methods ought to proceed. For standpoint epistemology, the challenge originated through a

[26] Ibid, 41

critique of science and the claims to epistemic standards of objectivity. It addressed the methods and outcome ambitions of our truth-seeking practices and the forms of social credibility we attribute to them. The standpoint epistemologists argued that our definitions of objectivity could silence, censure, or remove those credibility claims about lived experience that did not 'slot into' the existing scientific method.

Like Critical Theorists, Harding advocates reflexive practice as a means of restricting the influence of the researcher's presuppositions on the object of study.[27] Harding distinguishes between *weak* and *strong* forms of reflexive practice. A weak form of reflexive practice follows a notion of research methodology that appeals to a dispassionate observer and closely resembles Horkheimer's account of Traditional Theory. Here, the critic engages with the external world, or object of study, without 'any mechanism for identifying the cultural values and interests of the researchers.'[28] In contrast, a robust account of reflexivity entails responsibilities for the critic to acknowledge the situated dimension of research and to recognise that they are a participant in – and influence on – the object of study. This responsibility must be accepted because how one perceives the object of study is not neutral or interchangeable with the perspective of another critic. Within reflexive practices, the critic risks becoming complicit with the object of critique when they allow the presuppositions they bring to analysis to go unchecked. As Harding summarises this point:

> A notion of strong reflexivity would require that the objects of inquiry be conceptualised as gazing back in all their cultural particularity and that the researcher through theory and methods, stand behind them, gazing back at his

[27] Sandra Harding, "'Strong Objectivity" and Socially Situated Knowledge' in, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 138-63, 161

[28] Ibid, 162

> own socially situated research project in all its cultural particularity and its relationships to other projects of his culture.[29]

Responsibility requires, at minimum, a strong form of reflexive practice that interrogates our metrics of 'objectivity' and considers how the researcher's personal biases influence the diagnosis.

Despite pursuing a form of strong reflexivity, recent Critical Theory has advocated forms of reflexive practice that are simply not *strong enough*. I argue that a reflexive practice informed by standpoint theory illustrates the kinds of epistemic responsibilities overlooked in Critical Theory. This can be introduced by a second distinction drawn by Harding, between *weak* and *strong* forms of objectivity. Weak objectivity is the claim that knowledge about the external world can be value-neutral: that we can separate the subject of knowledge from the object and take up 'an Archimedean perspective from which the events and processes of the natural world appear in their proper places.'[30] Strong objectivity goes further and 'conceptualizes the value of putting the subject or agent of knowledge in the same critical, causal plane as the object of her or his inquiry.'[31] Since neither of these positions would be anathema to Critical Theory, we can recognise the straightforward overlap between standpoint theory and Critical Theory. However, the difference between them becomes apparent once we recognise how the standpoint theorist advocates the acceptance of reflexive responsibilities deeper than those currently acknowledged by the Critical Theorist; standpoint theorists insist the commitment to such deeper responsibilities is essential if the critic is to remain attuned to strong objectivity. The standpoint theorist offers a more situated account of reflexive responsibility, anchored in specific individuals'

[29] Ibid, 163
[30] Ibid, 157-8
[31] Ibid, 161

reflexive conduct. My argument in this dissertation will be that Critical Theorists need to learn from standpoint epistemology.

This heightened reflexivity advocated by standpoint theorists is illustrated by Donna Haraway when she writes:

> Positioning is… the key practice in grounding knowledge organised around the imagery of vision… Positioning implies responsibility for our enabling practices.[32]

Only by casting the reflexive gaze deeper, do writers like Haraway,[33] Rosanna Hertz,[34] and Patricia Hill Collins[35] believe the researcher can confront the political dimensions of their research. By contrast, recent Critical Theory has advocated forms of reflexive practice that are simply not strong enough to acknowledge fully the situated epistemic conditions under which theorising and social analysis take place, nor strong enough to act as a safety-check on whether, in our efforts to fulfil our emancipatory ambitions, we are not, in fact, reinforcing the unjust conditions under analysis.

The central claim of this thesis is that recent Critical Theorists pursue a form of reflexive practice that is irresponsible because it is too cognitive. They ignore how ideologies of race influence our outlook on the world in ways other than cognitive blockages, for example, through our habitual interaction with institutions. An account of reflexive scrutiny that limits itself to the cognitive realm will lack the responsibility which enables the theorist to track the social oppressions that characterise racism and forms of marginalisation.

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[32] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' in, *Feminist Studies,* (Vol. 14: No. 3, 1988), 575-99, 587

[33] Ibid

[34] Rosanna Hertz, 'Reflexivity and Voice' in, *Reflexivity and Voice* (ed. Rosanna Hertz), (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc, 1997), vii-xviii, viii

[35] Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 17

The three orders of reflexivity I appeal to are taken from the literature of Critical Theory and social epistemology. Within the Frankfurt School, there is a consistent distinction between first- and second-orders of analysis. As I have said, first-order experience is our immediate thoughts or experience; second-order critique looks at the values that underpin and frame these thoughts. Due to its emphasis on and legacy of ideology critique, the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory has long seen the role of critique as limited to second-order reflection. As Robin Celikates writes, 'one of the main tasks of Critical Theory is to analyse and bring to the agent's attention the distortions that block them from addressing and overcoming obstacles to emancipation.'[36]

Beyond these two orders, following Kristie Dotson, work in epistemic injustice has started to emphasise the importance of third-order reflexivity described as a 'third-order critique'. This, essentially, applies the reflexive gaze to the method of critique itself and pushes theorists to consider whether their frameworks for analysing first-order experience and second-order critique are adequate.[37] This approach goes beyond the scope of recent Critical Theory which has focused on the cognitive second-order realm by arguing for the importance of paying serious attention to first- and third-order.[38]

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[36] Celikates, 2017, 212

[37] Kristie Dotson, 'Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression' in, *Social Epistemology*, (Vol. 28: No. 2, 2014), 115-38, 30

[38] This numbering of 'order's is potentially unhelpful, since there is little reason to assume we might not arrive at fourth-orders (reflexivity about means to evaluate the efficacy of methodology, perhaps?), or even further orders. While this is a live possibility, I don't see why this should be much of a concern. If there were fourth-orders of reflexivity, either this would be a welcome benefit to reflexive activities, since it would offer an additional reflective action. Or, more likely, this additional aspect of reflexive activity wouldn't really alter the nature of reflexive practice in a meaningful way. Rather than identifying a new object of reflexive attention, or deepening our understanding of reflexive activities, an additional order would simply promote a circular account of reflexivity: persons engaged in reflexive activities (second-order), who then reflect on the tools with which they interpret and evaluate their reflexive activities (third-order), would then be repeating the previous orders of reflection (fourth-order).

## II. RESPONSIBILITY AND DOMESTICATION

Despite Critical Theory's legacy of reflexivity, the importance of this methodological concept is overshadowed by Critical Theory's primary commitment to social transformation. While this focus is understandable, given the tradition's political ambitions, it promotes an understanding of Critical Theory that underplays the ways in which reflexivity enables the researcher's diagnoses to make political contributions. This is illustrated clearly in the recent trend of attacks directed at the tradition of Critical Theory, which have centred on the failure of the tradition to focus on the 'emancipatory ambitions'.

This so-called *'domestication thesis'* argues that Critical Theory's political ambitions have taken a backseat in favour of philosophical investigations of its methodological foundations. Commentators such as Joel Whitebook,[39] Michael J. Thompson,[40] Amy Allen,[41] and Bernard E. Harcourt,[42] point to this emerging fault line within Critical Theory between its method and its transformative aspirations. These writers argue that Critical Theory, since Habermas, has focused on methodological questions to the detriment of the transformative aspirations of critique. Of course, robust theorising requires that these issues of identifying the normativity behind one's theorising must be tackled. But the challenge posed to contemporary Critical Theory is that these theories display a gap between the aspirations they seek to address and their own practice: they have become overly concerned with methodological critiques *of critique* that have sought to demonstrate the moral correctness of critical standards.[43] As

[39] Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 6

[40] See: Michael J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory,* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017)

[41] See: Allen, 2015

[42] Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020), 1

[43] Fabian Freyenhagen, 'What is Orthodox Critical Theory?' in, *World Picture,* (Vol. 12: No. 4, 2017), 1-11, 3

Harcourt claims, Critical Theory has become so preoccupied with identifying the conditions of validity for its theories that it has jettisoned its commitment to 'push thought in the direction of action and toward human liberation.'[44] Overall, domestication highlights the irony of the lack of critical thrust to such theories.

I agree with the domestication thesis. It is recognisable that Critical Theory has lost some of its connection to the emancipatory issues of contemporary social struggles due to its focus on methodological issues.[45] A particular focus throughout this thesis is to explore how recent Critical Theory has little to say regarding race-related injustices. This oversight is striking for the ways in which the historical legacies of racism are missing in theorists' explanation of the contemporary crises facing societies, especially economic inequality – an ironic oversight given the central place afforded to the critique of capitalism in the history of Critical Theory. Despite engaging with the contemporary effects of capitalism, it is interesting that Critical Theory, with its commitment to transformation, has little insight to bring to diagnosing the racial dimensions of our social landscape. This is all the more curious when we consider that Critical Theorists are operating in an era of growing public pressure for governments to engage both with the historical dimensions of racism, such as acknowledging and taking responsibility for, their colonial legacies, as well as dealing with contemporary effects of legacies, as signalled by the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Thus the social diagnoses of Critical Theory seem out of touch with the contemporary political struggles.

[44] Harcourt, 2020, 1

[45] There are certainly reasons for this, including the narrowing of academic interests through reshaping the academy. Thus, conducting critique within the pressures of contemporary academia, as opposed to an independently funded research organisation, as in the early years of the Institute of Social Research, might well provide some explanation for the 'domesticated' turn in Critical Theory. Nevertheless, the radical sting of Critical Theory has been taken out in ways that cannot be explained fully by institutional changes to academic research.

But, in addition to the domestication thesis' emphasis on the limited transformative ambitions of critique, it is also the case that the tradition of Critical Theory suffers from a more immanent problem connected to the Theory's commitment to reflexivity: a failure to take adequate account of racism. The more profound point I will make is that the historical and intellectual significance of this oversight feeds into the character and structure of the methods of reflexivity pursued in recent Critical Theory. It presents itself in the generalisable presuppositions of the theorists' methods, whether they are in their accounts of what constitutes a human, or methods of diagnosis that are not malleable enough to track injustices that intersect and thereby are irreducible to one generalisable master concept of injustice. I, therefore, propose to evaluate these methodological contributions head-on and ask whether these 'domesticated' approaches to Critical Theory actually could diagnose structural injustices related to racism. If they can't, then they must be considered irresponsible in certain aspects of their method.

Focusing on responsibility takes our understanding of critique in a new direction from recent criticism. Therefore, this thesis pursues a less familiar line of criticism regarding Critical Theory. Starting with reflexivity side-steps the problem of trying to evaluate critical social theory according to its emancipatory ambitions. Doing so would grant too much weight to the contribution of critique and risk presenting it as a vanguard. By contrast, reflexive practice is a better place to begin since it examines the sorts of social phenomena that a theory considers relevant and highlights to what extent theorists believe the phenomena are salient enough to factor into consideration in their interpretations. Starting with the reflexivity of a Critical Theory also allows us to focus on the kind of reflexive conduct that is adequate to its transformative ambitions. In this aspect, my dissertation is closer to the decolonial work of Amy Allen, which claims that there is something deficient with the foundations of the theories that

inhibit critique. For her, it is a set of too Eurocentric values, which weakens many social critical theories. In this respect, the issue for Allen and myself is not a concern that studying the method of Critical Theory is an academic distraction from its emancipatory aims; our concern is a profound one about the methods of Critical Theory themselves. It is our claim that these methods are not simply unhelpful to the emancipatory ambitions of critique but that they actually entrench the conditions they wish to transform. For this reason, I believe in a framework that focuses on whether the method pursues a responsible method of reflexivity.

Nevertheless, turning the focus away from Critical Theory's emancipatory ambitions in order to examine its reflexive commitments could be seen as a sly justification to domesticate critique and retreat further away from questions of praxis. My decision to evaluate Critical Theories according to their reflexive responsibility appears to be a prime example of what the theorist and lawyer, Bernard E. Harcourt, derides as 'the epistemic turn' in Critical Theory: a decades-long 'struggle of influence over the correct epistemological sensibility to guide critique.'[46] For Harcourt, Critical Theory has become so preoccupied with identifying the conditions of validity for its theories that it has jettisoned its commitment to 'push thought in the direction of action and toward human liberation.'[47] In short, Harcourt sees the epistemic turn as a move away from praxis.

Rather than shying away from questions of praxis, a responsibility-based approach clarifies the kind of praxis required by Critical Theory. Harcourt fears that 'Critical philosophers sought refuge in epistemology, almost as if to protect themselves and keep their hands clean.'[48] But by emphasising the risks of reflexive practice, my

[46] Harcourt, 2020, 8
[47] Ibid, 1
[48] Ibid, 9

proposal shows why the epistemic can never be a 'refuge' and that it is central to socially practical reasoning. If reflexive praxis is necessary for Critical Theory, then a responsibility-based approach enables us to ensure our critical projects are tied more closely to praxis.

The dangers of dismissing the epistemic as a place of refuge are illustrated by the epistemic effects of racialisation, such as 'White ignorance'. Charles W. Mills defines 'White ignorance' as a cognitive-historical phenomenon that refers not merely to a *lack* of knowledge but to the active *production* of knowledge which marginalises and misrepresents the experiences of non-white people.[49] White ignorance refers to a historic epistemic practice of marginalising the experiences of non-White people and undermining their credibility. A man can be elected President of the United States, and people still question the validity of his birth certificate.[50] Black women giving birth in the United States who demand painkillers are significantly less likely to receive them than non-Hispanic White women.[51] Their claims are simply treated as less credible. Because social imaginaries are malleable and open to reconfiguration or even transformation,[52] the paradigm acknowledges the potential for background assumptions to become exclusionary and ideological.[53] Mills uses White ignorance to describe an attitude of willfulness, whereby persons – regardless of race – refuse to recognise longstanding racial discrimination that has given White people hegemony of

[49] Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 154

[50] Michael Barbaro, 'Donald Trump Clung to 'Birther' Lie for Years, and Still Isn't Apologetic' in, *The New York Times,* (September 16, 2016)

[51] See: Navert Badreldin, William A. Grobman, and Lynn M. Yee, 'Racial Disparities in Postpartum Pain Management' in, *Obstet Gynecol,* (Vol. 134: No. 6, 2019), 1147-53; See also: Kelly M. Hoffman, Sophie Trawalter, Jordan R. Axt, and M. Norman Oliver, 'Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs About Biological Differences Between Blacks and Whites' in, *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* (Vol. 113: No. 16, 2016), 4296-4301

[52] Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 33

[53] Charles W. Mills, '"Ideal Theory" as Ideology' in, *Hypatia,* (Vol. 20: No. 3, 2005), 165-84, 170

distribution structures.[54] The concept of White ignorance demonstrates that the study of epistemic topics such as reflexivity is not a refuge from politics but rather a way of confronting the ubiquitous impact of the epistemic on the political. Harcourt misleadingly reinforces the view that Critical Theory's reflexive concerns are, in some way, discontinuous from its political ones. It, therefore, overlooks the important insight raised by Horkheimer's critical attitude, which understood the methods pursued by Critical Theory as being central to achieving to its political goals.

Nevertheless, Harcourt's warning about the political risks of the epistemic turn in Critical Theory should be kept in mind when promoting the significance of a concept like reflexivity. This is because reflexivity itself can quite quickly become the focus of political ambitions and promote a politics of narcissism that offers individualistic solutions to collective forms of oppression. This 'reflexivity trap' became mainstream in the wake of the racial reckoning that emerged after George Floyd's murder in the summer of 2020. During this period, widespread attention was given to publications that promoted anti-racism in ways that emphasised working through prejudices as a form of self-improvement. This misguided solution to the injustices that the 2020 protests highlighted reinforces the need for Critical Theorists – as much as anyone else – to avoid the reflexivity trap. Thus, the limits of critique's emancipatory praxis need to be recognised: the broader social efforts of transformation – such as institutional change – are not the exclusive outcome of individual or collective reflexive practice; both require forms of collaborative action beyond the epistemic sphere.

By emphasising reflexivity in the context of a transformative theory, I present a specific understanding of reflexivity that does not pretend that politics can be reduced

[54] Charles W. Mills, 'White Ignorance' in, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana), (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 11-38, 13

into individualistic solutions. In fact, one implication of centring reflexivity is to draw attention to how insignificant the political contributions of Critical Theory may be. The guaranteed change brought about by Critical Theory is limited to the theorist performing the diagnosis. However, this individual change affects Critical Theory's broader program of diagnosis, rather than being an end in itself. I, therefore, agree with Celikates's clarifying description of the place of reflexivity in Critical Theory:

> [O]ne of the main tasks of Critical Theory is to analyse and bring to the agent's attention the distortions that block them from addressing and overcoming obstacles to emancipation.[55]

Celikates points to the fact that the reflexive moment located in transformative theory, is a method that simply tries to diagnose the features of society that buttress the forms of oppression that a Critical Theory wishes to overcome. Nothing in this theory claims to instigate, or deliver, political change by itself. For Critical Theory to contribute to political change, it must, as Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly have argued, 'work within wider *communities of resistance* to achieve social change.'[56]

Therefore, a focus on reflexivity is not a retreat from Critical Theory's emancipatory ambitions; rather it is an effort to temper the significance of its work within larger political struggles. Once the modesty of Critical Theory's contribution to political transformation is acknowledged, then the importance of acting with reflexive responsibility ought to seem more crucial since producing robust social analyses is the contribution of critique.

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[55] Celikates, 2017, 212

[56] Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly, *Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 191

## III. OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

The structure of this dissertation consists of two methodological chapters and three that critique the use of reflexivity in Critical Theory. The two methodological chapters, One and Five, book-end this dissertation. As I outline below, each chapter contributes to our understanding of reflexive practice and responsibility in Critical Theory. Thus, Chapter One establishes an account of how reflexivity ought to be understood, whilst Chapter Five, drawing on the developing argument of the thesis, proposes that responsible reflexive practice must give a central role to the epistemic virtue of humility.

In this dissertation's three central chapters, I use reflexive practice to perform an immanent critique of recent work in Critical Theory to evaluate their reflexive responsibility. While the scope of the investigations of these three studies is not exhaustive of the many approaches to reflexivity found in Critical Theory, I have chosen to focus on aspects of reflexivity that I consider central to understanding the tradition's landscape. Thus, I explore the Kantian tradition in Chapter Two, the Left-Hegelian tradition in Chapter Three, and the aesthetic tradition in Chapter Four.

Each approach directs the critic to scrutinise the obstacles that inhibit their understanding of the situation under analysis. Yet, each pursues a different understanding of reason and therefore points to different obstacles. The Kantian approach focuses on reflexivity based on an autonomous account of reason, in which the critic has the duty of attuning themselves to relations of justification. The Left-Hegelian views reason as a social practice. Rather than revering reason as autonomous from broader social practices, it considers it to be situated within these dynamics and tied to questions of congruency. Finally, I consider approaches to Critical Theory that focus on the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience. While the three models of

aesthetic reflexivity are all examples of Kantian and Hegelian approaches to reflexivity, this third approach is explored due to the distinct reflexive importance that early Critical Theorists placed on aesthetic experience. The outcome of these criticisms provides general insight into reflexive practice, which are outlined and developed in Chapter Five.

The dissertation opens with an investigation into the meaning of reflexivity in Critical Theory. In Chapter One, I show that the concept has played a central role in Critical Theory. I illustrate that the concept must be split into two aspects: reflexive practice and social reflexivity. The chapter's object is the methodological use of reflexivity in Critical Theory, as presented in Horkheimer's account of the 'critical attitude'. I argue that reflexive practice is a perfectionist epistemic practice directed to certain epistemic goods which enable a critic's diagnoses to contribute to their emancipatory ambitions. By outlining the different responsibilities involved in a Critical Theory's reflexive practice, I present the framework used to evaluate the accounts of reflexive practice analysed in this dissertation.

Chapter Two focuses on the Kantian approach to Critical Theory and illustrates how reflexive practice is defined when reason is understood to be autonomous from social practices. To illustrate the Kantian approach, I explore the work of Rainer Forst and his account of a 'right to justification'. Forst believes that the critic must direct their diagnoses to analyse the violation of this underlying right. By situating his theory in the context of police brutality and racialisation in the United States, I show that his reflexive practice mischaracterises the complexity of structural injustices, such as those underpinning issues of race. Thus, this chapter highlights the limitations of Forst's reflexive practice and demonstrates why his abstract account of reason promotes an irresponsible account of critique.

In Chapter Three, I turn to Left-Hegelian approaches to Critical Theory by examining Rahel Jaeggi's account of reflexivity on forms of life. Jaeggi's account of forms of life suggests that crises emerge within forms of life when there is an inherent contradiction between their guiding norms and their operation. What is striking about Jaeggi's most recent work, *Critique of Forms of Life* (2018), is its lack of sustained examples of forms of life crises. To flesh it out, I situate Jaeggi's formal work on forms of life within examples of structural racism manifesting in the United States, centring around the 2014 water crisis in Flint, Michigan. By contextualising Jaeggi's work, I show that her method of diagnosis is reflexively irresponsible. Like Forst before her, Jaeggi reduces her analysis of social problems to the conceptual realm of shared second-order problems. This move distracts the potential critic away from the ways in which crises within forms of life, such as the Flint water crisis, exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities that cannot be reduced to a breakdown in our second-order values.

In Chapter Four, I outline the use of aesthetics in Critical Theory and how many theorists in the tradition have appealed to aesthetics as a specific form of reflexive practice. The chapter explores the connection between racialisation and aesthetics to dislodge the faith these theorists have placed in the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience. Considering Theodor W. Adorno and Alessandro Ferrara, and reading their work through the art of Josephine Baker and Kara Walker, respectively, I outline how the use of aesthetics in the tradition of Critical Theory has both romanticised the autonomy of art from ideologies such as racialisation, in addition to reinforcing racial ideologies by failing to question the racial assumptions underpinning certain hierarchies of aesthetic value. Drawing on the work of Martin Seel and reading him the context of the artist Leonardo Drew, I conclude the chapter by proposing a more responsible, albeit less ambitious, understanding of aesthetic reflexivity.

The concluding chapter of this dissertation offers the basis for an account of how we act with reflexive responsibility. It focuses on reflexive practice as an implicit commitment to particular epistemic virtues, centrally humility. I argue that appealing to a virtue framework helps to explain both the developmental nature of the critical attitude and the specific responsibility that should guide a critic's reflexive practice. Thus, this chapter tries to understand the local aspect of transformation and argues that it is limited to a change in the critic's character through the cultivation of the critical attitude. This is the change that Critical Theory *can* achieve. As a result, I reconcile a virtue theory framework with the emancipatory social aspirations of Critical Theory while arguing that those emancipatory aspirations are contingent and an aspect of hope. Nevertheless, restricting the ambitions of reflexivity to individual transformation, while it focuses on the political limitations of reflexive practice, thereby adds more urgency to the need for critique to be more collaborative in pursuit of its emancipatory ambitions.

## IV. CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation studies the concept of reflexivity in 'Frankfurt School' Critical Theory. In many respects, what follows might be read as a treatise on method and yet another contribution to the domestication of Critical Theory. Such a conclusion, however, would sadly miss the purpose of this thesis. Its motivation is to show that while Critical Theories are emancipatory theories, the transformations wrought by their work are limited in comparison to their political ambitions. Nevertheless, for these diagnoses to produce work that can make a collaborative contribution to social change, then, it is vital that the theorists's method should not lead them to 'shoot themselves in the foot'! It is, therefore, essential to recognise the ways in which Critical

Theory can perform its diagnostic task in a responsible way that contributes to, rather than hinders or obfuscates, the social conditions that entrench social injustices.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *REFLEXIVE PRACTICES*

# Chapter One

## Reflexive Practices

In the tradition of Critical Theory, reflexivity has two meanings. Firstly, it is tied to the tradition's emancipatory goals. On this basis, the diagnoses of Critical Theory contribute to increased aggregate levels of understanding among members of society regarding the obstacles that sustain forms of oppression and injustice. This idea of 'social reflexivity' is distinct from a second, methodological use of the term by Critical Theorists. Methodologically, reflexivity refers to the safety-checks taken up by the researcher to factor in the biases and assumptions they bring to the object of study. These safety-checks I define as 'reflexive practices.'

Using the idea of 'reflexive practice' provides an immanent way of evaluating recent accounts of Critical Theory associated with the Frankfurt School. In Sections One and Two of this Chapter, I demonstrate that reflexive practice entails certain epistemic responsibilities derived from critique's overarching politically transformative aspirations. I show that to conduct critique in a 'reflexively responsible' manner requires the critic to act, not merely as a competent epistemic agent, but to also to develop a 'critical attitude' towards their own research practices. Thus, critics act with 'reflexive responsibility' when their diagnoses contribute to unsettling, rather than entrenching, forms of oppression and injustice.[1]

Placing epistemic responsibility at the heart of reflexive practice enables us to recognise the immanent reflexive weaknesses found in contemporary work in Critical Theory. In Sections Three and Four, I introduce the argument that runs throughout

[1] Sally Haslanger, 'Political Epistemology and Social Critique' in, *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy Volume 7* (ed. David Sobel, Peter Vallentyne, and Steven Wall), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 23-65, 37

this thesis: that recent Critical Theory has lost sight of the situatedness of the critic. It is shown that a focus on second-order considerations has undermined the capacity of recent Critical Theory to remain reflexively aware of the influence of race on the critic's epistemic presuppositions. This oversight manifests in Critical Theories that are unable to diagnose the intersecting oppressions that define life under conditions of structural racism. The outcome of such reflexively irresponsible diagnosis, as this thesis argues, is to risk entrenching conditions of racial hierarchies of knowledge and thus a failure to live up to the goal which guide responsible reflexive practice: contributing to political change that transforms relations of oppression.

## I. WHAT IS REFLEXIVITY?

Reflexivity can mean diverse things. When Critical Theorists appeal to reflexivity, they're not referring to a neurological use of the concept, such as whether cats have sharper reflexes than humans.[2] Nor do they appeal to a moral approach to reflexivity, which would describe forms of self-reflection in such a way as to endorse moral principles as our own.[3] Guiding Critical Theory's use of reflexivity is an epistemic conception which examines the presuppositions of our knowledge claims. Reflexive scrutiny is deemed necessary because Critical Theorists consider epistemic presuppositions to bear the marks of the social-historical context in which agents and their knowledge practices are situated.[4] When research is conducted without forms of reflexive scrutiny, Critical Theorists believe we risk overlooking the influence that

[2] Kevin Olson, 'Reflexive Democracy as Popular Sovereignty' in, *New Waves in Political Philosophy* (eds. Christopher Zurn and Boujdewijn de Bruijn), (London: Palgrave, 2009), 125-42, 126

[3] In Chapter Two, I show Rainer Forst to be an exception to this on account of his Kantian approach to Critical Theory.

[4] Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 20

dominant social forces, like historical forms of oppression such as racialisation, colonialism, and capitalist inequality, have on the forms of hierarchies of truth and credibility that underpin our knowledge practices.[5]

The concept of reflexivity is therefore used to explain something about the nature of epistemic life. Rather than navigating the world neutrally, Critical Theorists hold that agents take on a partial perspective because human consciousness and shared epistemic practices are, in Critical Theorist Seyla Benhabib's words, just another 'aspect of human material existence.'[6] Throughout this dissertation, such partiality is illustrated through processes of racialisation. Racialisation describes how structures of racial oppression promote meanings to different bodies on the basis of their appearance, smell, and sound. For example, the over-policing of Black communities in the United States has helped stabilise racial stereotypes that associate Black youth with criminality. The Chicago-based writer Marquise Paino captures this effect of racialisation when describing the everyday experience of racialised policing in Chicago, where he 'live[s] in a place where everybody watches you everywhere you go. As a young Black male, everybody watches you. Police pull you over for no reason.'[7] How police in Chicago racialise young Black men as criminal or suspicious is but one example of the ways in which social structures of power, inequality, and racism can, as philosopher George Yancy's work on 'the white gaze' illustrates, foster partiality in our epistemic practices, 'shaping how one sees and how one *does not* see the world.'[8] What is important for Critical Theory is that examples like racialisation explain how

[5] Haslanger, 2021, 25; See also: Chapter 11 of Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* (London: Routledge, 2009)

[6] Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 4

[7] Mariame Kaba, "'I Live In a Place Where Everybody Watches You Everywhere You Go'" in, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (ed. Tamara K. Nopper), (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021), 88-92

[8] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (2nd ed), (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 134

epistemic presuppositions, such as racial biases, can frame the world in ways that reinforce wider problems of oppression. This dissertation illustrates why these practices require our reflexive attention by drawing attention to the risks that emerge from ignoring the situated nature of our epistemic practices.

Reflexivity is, therefore, a concept through which Critical Theorists articulate their commitment to praxis. Improving levels of social understanding in regard to the sources of social injustice and the obstacles – material, symbolic and epistemic – which stabilise them is done to contribute to social change.[9] This is what is meant by philosopher Raymond Geuss's pithy suggestion that Critical Theory's task of promoting 'enlightenment' about negative social conditions through social diagnosis is an effort to 'emancipate' us from such conditions.

But this familiar formulation of enlightenment and emancipation risks obscuring the purpose and method of Critical Theories. Without further clarification of the place of reflexivity in praxis, we might misconstrue the aims of Critical Theory as promoting exclusively epistemic solutions to social change, removed from institutions and politics. Reflexivity is less of a solution to social problems rather than forming one part of a wider programme of change. To appreciate this collaborative aspect of Critical Theory's praxis, it is necessary to draw a crucial distinction between the changes which Critical Theories aspire to and the changes their work actually brings about. Thus, there are different kinds of reflexivity relating to the purpose of praxis (social reflexivity) and the method of praxis (reflexive practice). As I now show, these differ with respect to their relation to praxis, the subject of reflexivity, and the change brought about by reflexivity.

[9] Michael J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory,* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 157

Reflexivity connects to praxis in two ways. First, it refers to Critical Theory's purpose of establishing increased levels of social awareness – of social reflexivity – regarding the stabilising conditions of oppressive societies. This gets to the Marxian view that the role of the researcher is to 'clarify the struggles of the age.'[10] On this account, reflexivity connects to praxis through the collaborative relationship of the critic's work to wider social struggles for social change. Social change is not instigated or led by the researcher. Instead, the researcher works to promote increased social reflexivity through their social analyses, whilst others might work on forms of group organising, legal challenges, or lead protests.

We can see this connection to social reflexivity in various descriptions of the aims of Critical Theory. For example, the Critical Theorist Robin Celikates describes its task as identifying 'social conditions that prevent agents from taking part in social practices of critique by obstructing the development or exercise of their reflexive capacities.'[11] Likewise, the theorist and translator Thomas McCarthy points to Critical Theory's general enlightening ambition that 'aims to enhance and transform our self-understanding in ways that affect how we live.'[12] Finally, Benhabib captures the connection of social reflexivity to praxis in her claim that critical social theory seeks 'to demystify the apparent objectivity of social processes.'[13] All three descriptions point to the clarifying role that the researcher's work is intended to play in wider social struggles, which involves directing the wider public's attention to overlooked, or taken-for-granted, aspects of societies that stabilise relations of oppression.

[10] Nancy Fraser, 'What is Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender' in, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis,* (London: Verso, 2013), 19-52, 19

[11] Robin Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding,* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), Ch. 3, Epub

[12] David Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory,* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 14

[13] Benhabib, 1987, 9

The effort to tie the work of Critical Theory to increased levels of social reflexivity is clear in the past three generations of Critical Theory, where Jürgen Habermas pointed to the social necessity of maintaining paths for open communication in democratic societies,[14] Axel Honneth emphasised the dangers of disrespect in societies by pointing to the foundational role played by recognition in human psychological development and the institutions necessary to foster it,[15] and Rahel Jaeggi tried to direct attention the ongoing role of alienation in our lives in our ability to wield control over – to appropriate – our decisions.[16] Nevertheless, the clarifying ambitions of Critical Theory establish a tension between researchers and the social struggles they claim to represent. However much Critical Theory might resist claims of aspiring to become an intellectual vanguard, the epistemic character of its praxis, whereby the critic, through their diagnoses, lays claim to a privileged insight into the 'true nature' of society, has fostered this risk. The concept of reflexivity, therefore, is not exhausted by the ambition of improved social understanding and must therefore be separated from a second methodological use of reflexivity.

Reflexivity, in this second sense, tempers the broader transformative and collaborative goals of Critical Theory and connects to its method of praxis. Here, reflexivity refers to an action of self-reflection that involves scrutinising oneself as a situated knower in order to observe one's influence upon one's object of study.[17] It forms the epistemic safety-check to the effects of situated knowing since it tries to attune the researcher to their own situation of analysis and the prejudices they bring.[18]

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[14] See: Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (trans. Thomas Burger), (Cambridge: Polity, 2011)

[15] See: Axel Honneth, 'Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy' (trans. Joseph Ganahl) in, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory,* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 3-48

[16] See: Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (trans. Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith), (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014)

[17] Kim V. L. England, 'Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research' in*, The Professional Geographer*, (Vol. 54: No. 1, 1994), 80-9, 82

[18] Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020)*,* 163

As anthropologist Kim V. L. England has described it, reflexivity is 'the self-conscious *analytic* scrutiny of the self as researcher.'[19] Without a process of self-scrutiny, the assumptions that frame the concrete perspective of individuals can go unchecked, which could not only influence the gathering of research material and analysis, but more regrettably, inadvertently reinforce certain tendencies in the oppressive societies they analyse.[20] We can see this in the risks reflexive practice poses within the racialised contexts of the United States. From the seemingly benign act of mis-aging children to the increased likelihood of shoot-and-kill research in social psychology has shown the impact of bias that reflexive practice seeks to adjust for.[21] Racialised presuppositions can frame our interpretation of the situation of study and thus require reflexive methodological scrutiny.

This process of scrutiny occurs as a feedback loop which I call *reflexive practice*.[22] Generally, a *practice* has standards that determine its success and guide its performance.

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[19] England, 1994*,* 82

[20] Paul Willis and Mats Trondman, 'Manifesto for Ethnography' in, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies,* (Vol. 2: No. 3, 2002), 394-402, 399

[21] With regard to misaging, studies of White female students in U.S. public universities, as well as White police officers, were found to overestimate the age of Black felons by four and half years, two years older than White subjects (532). As Philip Atiba Goff et al concluded, 'Because Black felony subjects were seen as 4.53 years older than they actually were, this would mean that boys would be misperceived as legal adults at roughly the age of 13 and a half'. See: Philip Atiba Goff et al, 'The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children' in, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* (Vol. 106: No. 4, 2014), 526-45. Work on shoot-and-kill by Joshua Correll et al modelled racial bias in shoot-and-kill games and found: 'As predicted, reading about Black criminals dramatically increased the participants' tendency to make a stereotypic pattern of errors (shooting unarmed Balcks, failing to shoot armed Whites). That is, when information reinforced (rather than undermined) the stereotypic link between Blacks and danger, bias in shoot/don't-shoot errors increased.' (114). See: Joshua Correll et al, 'The Influence of Stereotypes on Decisions to Shoot' in, *European Journal of social Psychology,* (Vol. 37: 2007), 1102-17.

[22] Generally, practices do not themselves engage in reflection (the caveat is here given due to the possibilities afforded by practices carried out by AI). Rather it is the agents of these practices who need to be(come) reflexive; it is this human aspect of practices that leads Jaeggi to prefix them with 'social'. To describe a practice as being 'reflexive' – in the specific sense articulated in this thesis – would be misleading, therefore, as it assumes that the practice itself has epistemic agency. It is more accurate, in my view, to claim that persons carry out practices and make these more or less reflexive, and that the structure of a practice can facilitate more or less reflection. For example, the social practice of distributing information, as exercised by news media, would be 'more open to being reflected upon' by persons if the threshold for the successful performance of the practice was understood to include requirements such as verification of reports by multiple sources, restrictions on libel, or restrictions on monopoly ownership of news outlets. Thus, while a social practice – as understood by Jaeggi – could be executed more reflexively, and thus the

Practices follow certain rules and are, therefore, repeatable and recognisable by others.[23] This gives it a teleological structure, whereby it has an end to which the object is directed as a whole and, its individual parts are determined by that end. These features can explain what things are needed to realise this end and, ultimately, can be used to evaluate it.[24] The practice of brushing one's hair, for example, entails passing a comb through one's hair in a variety of directions. If I start combing the neighbour's dog, or drag the comb up and down my fingers, then I haven't met the 'standards appropriate to [the activity]' of brushing one's hair.[25] Thus, at a methodological level, reflexivity is the attempt to acknowledge the partiality of the researcher in these contexts and attempt to gain some distance from ourselves and our presuppositions in order to scrutinise the very process of reflection itself.[26] This end is achieved by creating a level of critical distance from the self and one's presuppositions by means of disciplined self-reflection and is distinct from the aims of social reflexivity.[27]

The two meanings of reflexivity also refer to different subjects. First, the subject of social reflexivity is straightforward and appeals to collections of persons, such as groups, communities, or societies at large. Given the larger scope of persons gathered under the banner of social reflexivity, the subject is aggregative of that group's collective understanding of the relevant social presuppositions. Second, the subject of reflexive practice refers to individual researchers. The site of reflexivity is understood throughout this thesis as a person's epistemic character. As the political philosopher

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agent would be better at identifying problems prior to an emergence of crises, it would be inaccurate to claim the practice is achieving this independent of persons.

[23] See: Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed), (London: Gerald Duckworth, 2007)

[24] David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 185

[25] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'The Nature of the Virtues' in, *The Hastings Center Report,* (Vol. 11: No. 2, 1981), 27-34, 30

[26] Wanda Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research' in, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education,* (Vol. 16: No. 2, 2003), 175-96, 177

[27] Linda Finlay, 'Reflexivity: An Essential Component for All Research?' in, *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, (Vol. 61: No. 10, 1998), 453-6, 453

Christopher Lebron has explained in his study on race and shame, character 'essentially represents the seat of our judgments towards others and ourselves.'[28] In the context of the situated account of knowledge outlined so far, the 'seat of judgment' is not something neutral or given, rather it is the product of the particular forms of habituation and socialisation that persons undergo in society.[29] Epistemic character is tied to specific forms of lived experience that emerge from a person's relation to social structures. The term refers to the ways in which social and historical practices frame individual understanding, and lead to habituated presuppositions about bodies prior to our encounter with them. The resulting character is thus seen in pragmatist terms, as the decolonial philosopher Vrinda Dalmiya aptly puts it, 'a constellation of traits or dispositions to act in specific ways.'[30] The concept of epistemic character therefore pushes back against a neutral or interchangeable view of the researcher and seeks to illuminate the lived experience of the researcher, what intrigues them, what features of society are more or less salient to them. Reflexive practice is the individual effort to reflect on these scholastic habits and expectations that make up the situated limits of their understanding as a reflexive subject.[31]

The final difference between the two concepts of reflexivity centres on the change brought about by reflexivity. Reflexive practice is often dismissed as navel-gazing,[32] as critique's solipsistic self-interest with itself, thereby producing too

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[28] Lebron, 2013, 51

[29] See: Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., 'Relation Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Wilful Hermeneutic Injustice' in, *Hypatia,* (Vol. 27: No. 4, 2012), 715-35

[30] Vrinda Dalmiya, *Caring to Know: Comparative Care Ethics, Feminist Epistemology, and the Mahābhāta,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 41

[31] See: Rosanna Hertz, 'Reflexivity and Voice' in, *Reflexivity and Voice* (ed. Rosanna Hertz), (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc, 1997), vii-xviii

[32] For example, Andrea Smith describes reflexivity in her view that, in the context of racial privilege, 'the undoing of privilege occurs not by individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think themselves into a new subject position, but through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges.' The emancipatory hopes of racial justice, for example, will not be achieved through reflexive practice. But she is wrong to reduce reflexive practice with a project of ethical and epistemic self-fashioning as sufficient and occurring in the absence of wider structural change. Reflexive practice ought to be a part – albeit a very small part – of emancipatory struggles. See: Andrea Smith, 'Unsettling

individualistic an understanding of consciousness-raising.[33] While these concerns are certainly accurate criticisms of particular accounts of reflexivity, they're inaccurate as a general dismissal of the value of reflexivity. Instead, they misconstrue or even collapse the two kinds of reflexivity laid out so far and the different changes they work towards. To protect against this, we must distinguish between the ultimate change of enlightenment that Critical Theories aspire to and the changes such theories actually bring about. The differences can be articulated by distinguishing between two different aspirations in praxis: melioristic and perfectionist.

Meliorism is a theory directed to things being better, but it remains open-ended as to what the better *is,* as well as not holding out for the *best* or the *good.* This open-ended character of Critical Theory is described by Celikates as the unending 'capacity of self-reflection' that 'one must constantly appropriate… anew, never sure that one possess[es] it.'[34] Meliorism thereby captures the change that Critical Theory's transformative ambitions of improved social reflexivity aspire to, as well as the important caveat that such achievements are never guaranteed or articulated ahead of their emergence. Acknowledging the melioristic character of social reflexivity is an important step in avoiding the mistake of attributing too much importance to Critical Theory's diagnostic work. It is, in short, an account of change that retains hope in some positive transformation and the practical role of persons in bringing about change, but does not claim to bring about that change directly.[35]

But while meliorism forms the core dynamic of the emancipatory orientation that guide Critical Theories, it overlooks the dynamics of methodological change that

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the Privilege of Self-Relfexivity' in, Geographies of Privilege (eds. France Winddance Twine and Bradley Gardener), (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 263-80.

[33] Haslanger, 2020, 39

[34] Celikates, 2018, Ch. 3, Epub

[35] Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), 148

constitute the diagnostic praxis of Critical Theory. I argue this can only be captured by perfectionism, understood as directed to achieving a particular good. The meaning of perfectionism depends heavily on the context, to the extent that different usages even appear contradictory. At its most general, however, perfectionist theories claim that there are values or goods we ought to work towards realising or achieving. They depend on a teleological framework that argues that this good is desirable since it is instrumental in developing properties which are some kind of excellence.[36]

By invoking the language of perfectionism in the context of reflexive practice, I am not appealing to the concept's usage found in debates on liberalism in political theory. In this body of work, perfectionism is typically associated with paternalism, which considers certain goods, values, or even ways of life to be so important that it is justifiable that persons should be persuaded to pursue them as opposed to others.[37] Such an approach is clear in legal philosopher Joseph Raz's service conception of authority in which a political state has legitimate authority to promote goods which would improve the basic interests of its citizens.[38] Critical Theorists would likely reject this approach, however, given the tradition's sensitivity on the relationship between political authority and the steering effects of capitalism in entrenching forms of oppression that would undermine human autonomy.

By describing reflexive practice as perfectionist, I am not claiming that it operates on this paternalistic conception. While identifying certain goods, reflexive practice doesn't refer to the process of persuasion or intervention. Nor are the goods promoted moral ones. My reading of reflexive practice limits itself to epistemic goods, such as autonomy (discussed in Section Three) or humility (discussed in Chapter Five).

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[36] Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4

[37] John Rawls, *Justice a Fairness: A Restatement* (ed. Erin Kelly), (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 152; Lebron, 2013, 126

[38] See: Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986)

On this basis, I use the notion of perfectionism to describe the teleological relation between actions and the goods to which actions aspire, justifying these goods as the right ones.[39]

Perfectionism, in this sense, helps capture the teleological aims of reflextive practice, which is to achieve forms of epistemic conduct that enable good diagnoses and which protect against the risks of situated rationality. The situated character of Critical Theories places temporal constraints on their findings, such that the insights we draw are not stable but must adapt to their situation, and the theorist must be willing to discard their presumptions.[40] Thus, reflexivity is an ongoing process of self-scrutiny and questioning. Thomas McCarthy captures this with respect to the open-ended character of Critical Theory that its findings are never absolute or complete, but 'an ever-renewed effort to comprehend contemporary society from a practically interested point of view.'[41]

To achieve this specific epistemic goal, reflexive practice is directed to the very specific task of scrutinising one's presuppositions, a task which transforms the critic's attunement to the situation of study and, as Max Horkheimer put it, 'runs counter to prevailing habits of thought.'[42] Because reflexive practice aims at specific (epistemic) goods, there is a clear distinction to the kind of melioristic change that guides an aspiration to increased social reflexivity. By facilitating the conditions of good diagnoses by the researcher, reflexive practice plays an instrumental role in achieving a Critical Theory's overarching ambition of increased social reflexivity. Perfectionism

[39] See: Lebron, 2013, 50-1

[40] Celikates, 2018, Ch. 3, Epub.

[41] Hoy and McCarthy, 1994, 18

[42] Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and Others), (New York, NY: Continuum, 1975), 188-243, 218

helps to explain the kind of epistemic goods required of reflexive practice if it is to contribute to the wider melioristic project of social change.[43]

Separating Critical Theory into its melioristic and perfectionist tasks gives us more insight into the different practical issues such a theory offers. The transformations produced by reflexive practice do not claim to change – or even contribute to – the material environment that lies at the root of bias and interpretation; reflexive practice brings these social forces, such as power relations, into the researcher's focus, but doesn't remove background conditions of inequality and disadvantage.[44] Instead, reflexive practice must be understood as one part of a wider method of Critical Theory, which is to acknowledge that a researcher's perspective is never impartial and serves as the means by which the potential biases are taken into account.[45] Any change that does occur is limited to the individual critic who makes up the subject of reflexive practice. At an individual level, it might open an opportunity to stimulate longer-term change in the researcher, but this requires repeated habit change, rather than a one-off disclosure. It is hoped that their subsequent analysis, in collaboration with others, will contribute to improved social reflexivity, although this is never guaranteed.

Thus, Critical Theory is driven by two 'master' commitments. First and foremost is the emancipatory – even utopian – ambition to live in societies that are rid of oppression. The values that guide different approaches to critique, such as the need for recognition, the right to justification, or problem-solving of forms of life, are best understood as normative values that are connected to the transformative ambitions of Critical Theory. Second, is the reflexive commitment to perform research in ways that

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[43] Koopman, 2015, 148

[44] England, 1994, 83

[45] Robin M. Boylorn, 'Gray or For Coloured Girls Who Are Tired of Chasing Rainbows: Race and Reflexivity' in, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies,* (Vol. 11: No. 2, 2011), 178-86, 185

support, rather than hinder these emancipatory visions. This explicit commitment to a reflexive methodology has distinguished Critical Theory since Max Horkheimer's treatise on the approach. The significance of this second commitment to Critical Theorists is tied to a social ontology regarding the nature of reason as something that is always situated within a specific social context. Thus, a theorist who views their society to be structured by oppression and wishes to contribute to its transformation, must be aware of the influence that such forces might have on their ability to analyse and interpret the society. Without the ability to take a reflexive stance on standpoints, Critical Theorists risks limiting their ability to act on their commitment to emancipation. For these reasons, Critical Theory should be understood as being driven by two 'master' commitments of emancipation and reflexivity.

In this section, I have introduced Critical Theory's relationship to the concept of reflexivity. I've emphasised the importance of recognising the two meanings of reflexivity in Critical Theory – social reflexivity and reflexive practice – and their relation to praxis. I have suggested that reflexive practices are teleological, that they aim at specific epistemic goods within the wider, and more open-ended melioristic outlook of Critical Theory regarding improved social reflexivity. With this continuous interaction between method and aim, the importance of reflexive practice should be clear insofar as it plays a facilitating role in a Critical Theory's wider ambitions. I now argue that this perfectionist structure provides a way of evaluating reflexive practice immanently through responsibilities, which will then be applied to contemporary Critical Theory in the subsequent section.

## II. REFLEXIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Given the particular kind of self-reflection reflexive practice involves, it must be seen to follow certain guidelines of better and worse epistemic conduct. When the reflexive practice is insufficient and fails to contextualise or revise an agent's presuppositions, it risks misdiagnosing situations or stabilising the social conditions that theorists seek to transform. To explain why such poor conduct should be considered undesirable, I now lay out how the conduct of Critical Theories ought to be construed in terms of responsibilities. Casting Critical Theories in terms of responsibilities yields a clear explanation of how critique's aspiration to engage in social change influences the method of reflexive practice. Additionally, by building upon reflexive practice's perfectionist structure, a responsibility framework provides an immanent way of evaluating accounts of reflexive practice. This framework is taken up in subsequent chapters to critique recent accounts of reflexive practice and show their reflexive practice to be irresponsible.

Whether the grounds for responsibility are moral, political, or epistemic, claims of responsibility can be distinguished as backward- or forward-looking varieties.[46] Consider a dog who produces a mess on the pavement. On a backward-looking assessment, there's little doubt that it's the dog who is responsible for having made the mess. The purpose of responsibility in this sense is to establish who is liable for the production of an action, so that we can then attribute praise or guilt for what they have done.[47] And it's clear to everyone on the pavement that the dog made the mess. But in circumstances of this kind, interest soon turns to forward-looking claims of

[46] Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 48

[47] Maeve McKeown, 'Iris Marion Young's "Social Connection Model" of Responsibility: Clarifying the Meaning of Connection' in, *Journal of Social Philosophy,* (Vol. 49: No. 3, 2018), 483-502, 485

responsibility, namely, who should clean up the dog's mess. Therefore, claims of responsibility in this second, forward-looking sense appeal to who is responsible for change or transformation. Few bystanders would attribute such responsibility to the dog and, instead, turn an expectant gaze towards the dog's walker.

This distinction between forward- and backwards-looking claims of responsibility clarifies the relation between the different ambitions that make up praxis, namely, the aim of improved social reflexivity and the performance of reflexive practice. Typically, Critical Theorists do not engage in critique as restitution for guilt of past wrongs; they do so because they consider they ought to engage in action that contributes to the removal of oppressive social structures independently of their personal association with the roots of the injustices. In this respect, the overarching, melioristic aims of praxis can be seen to resonate with – rather than strictly subscribe to – a forward-looking claim of responsibility. This forward-looking responsibility is grounded by political reasons that seek to promote action that intends to emancipatory change, rather than stabilise, the status quo.

Reflexive practice is also forward-looking given that it is directed towards an improvement of one's theorising and thereby contributes to social change. However, since researchers are directly accountable for ensuring that they bring their own epistemic character and the lived experience of the subjects of study into focus within the research process, the responsibilities that guide reflexive practice are backwards-looking.[48] This is because the researcher is liable for the quality of their analysis and its relevance to those whom it addresses. This backwards-looking aspect of reflexive practice affords us an immanent point of evaluation.

[48] Boylorn, 2011, 179

Reflexive practice and the transformative aspirations of Critical Theory are connected through the risk of complicity. Complicity introduces an alternative relation that persons can have to social injustices, a relation which differs from liability. Where liability characterises conduct that is directly culpable for the cause of an action, complicity directs our attention to forms of conduct that stabilise ongoing actions, the origin of which are independent of that conduct. Blame is unhelpful in the context of injustices when, as political theorist, Iris Marion Young described, 'it is not possible to identify how the actions of one particular individual… directly produced harm to other specific individuals.'[49] Structural injustices are one such example. On Young's account, structural injustices produce forms of domination and marginalisation but do so without explicit forms of liability since the injustices are the product of the everyday reproduction of social processes.[50] For example, when exploring forms of racism, the root problem is less acts of interpersonal discrimination and more the structures that they relate to, for example, the inequalities in life expectancy, inequalities in inherited wealth, or disproportionate incarceration levels between African Americans and White Americans in the United States,[51] or between first-nations Canadians and White Canadians. The issue, therefore, is how the everyday operation of institutions and other processes coordinating with one another constrain the experiences of persons and groups, creating complicity with injustice which may be independent of the direct and liable actions of those persons.[52]

In Young's framework, complicity is bound up with a forward-looking account of political responsibility. Political responsibility, as theorised in Young's 'social connection' model of responsibility, describes the role of responsibility in structural

[49] Young, 2011, 52
[50] Ibid
[51] Joe Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression,* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 42-3
[52] Young, 2011, 37

injustices in which an individual's, a group's, or a corporation's actions contribute to maintaining structural injustices without those people or groups being personally liable:

> Being [politically] responsible in relation to structural injustice means that one has an obligation to join with others who share that responsibility in order to transform the structural processes that make their outcomes less unjust.[53]

Political responsibility, therefore, is an attempt to discharge our responsibilities in the context of structural injustices. These responsibilities are future-oriented and focus on changing conditions which reproduce structural injustice.

But the praxis of Critical Theories develops this picture of complicity as a form of behaviour that entails only forward-facing political responsibility directed at social change. While persons are not to blame for structural injustices, they can be complicit in their reproduction, which means that persons can be held liable for complicit conduct against a standard of backwards-looking responsibility. Building on Young's notion of structural injustice, theorists Corwin Aagon's and Alisson Jaggar's account of complicity allude to precisely this possibility and suggest that:

> People are structurally complicit when they exercise their agency in ways that reinforce the unjust social structures in which they participate, regardless of their conscious intentions.[54]

My argument in this thesis is that irresponsible reflexive practice should be understood as an example of the complicit participation described by Aagon and Jaggar. In

[53] Ibid

[54] Corwin Aagon and Allison M. Jaggar, 'Agency, Complicity, and the Responsibility to Resist Structural Injustice' in, *Journal of Social Philosophy,* (Vol. 49: No. 3, 2018). 439-60, 449

reflexive practice, complicity arises due to insufficient diagnoses, ones which entrench conditions of inequality rather than change them. The anthropologist Karen Lumsden and Aaron Winter have described the adverse effects of such diagnoses, arguing that they sometimes contribute to the 'further stigmatisation and marginalisation of powerless subjects.'[55] In this way, the notion of complicity can be used to evaluate the success of Critical Theories immanently since it allows us to examine the efficacy of the theorist's reflexive practice.

Decolonial philosopher Serene Khader illustrates the acts of complicity performed by the Critical Theorist in her criticisms of transnational feminism, *missionary feminisms,* and of making normative claims across cultural contexts. Khader has argued to be aware of the kinds of 'trojan horses' in which we smuggle thick versions of the good and posit them in inappropriate social contexts.[56] Khader isn't challenging positive ideals but the transnational application of Western values as given or neutral rather than acknowledged as being culturally thick.[57] To take Khader's language, the sort of 'epistemic habits' that establish a 'blocking force' on the theorist are the sorts of things that the research has a responsibility to reflect upon in reflexive practice if that practice is to mitigate complicity.[58] In recognising the prevalence of complicity, the reflexive practitioner acknowledges that some persons have enough access to resources to challenge their epistemic laziness, even if, for instance, those persons might not be directly liable for socialising into racialised habits.[59]

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[55] Karen Lumsden and Aaron Winter, 'Reflexivity in Criminological Research' in, *Reflexivity in Criminological Research: Experiences with the Powerful and the Powerless* (eds. Karen Lumsden and Aaron Winter), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-19, 4

[56] Serene J. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4

[57] Ibid, 12

[58] Ibid, 17

[59] Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., 'Varieties of Epistemic Injustice' in, *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (eds. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.), (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 13-26, 17

It is true that because diagnosis has an interest in removing social problems, there is always a forward-looking sense of responsibility: that inquiry should not stabilise or exacerbate the problems it investigates. If your research is committed to social change, you must avoid compounding existing hierarchies of knowledge. Nevertheless, when researchers engage in reflexive practice, their work can be evaluated against a standard of backwards-facing responsibility, as to whether their diagnoses were complicit and helped to stabilise the injustices they sought to remove.

A responsibility framework clarifies the nature of critical praxis. The framework deepens the explanation of why and how reflexive practice is not an end in itself but is always performed in the service of a Critical Theory's wider transformative ambitions.[60] The liability structure, therefore, illuminates how reflexive practice, as an action that enables the Critical Theorist to reduce their complicity in the injustices they analyse, ultimately serves an instrumental aspect to the larger aims of praxis. The liability one has for the quality of one's reflexive practice is shown to derive its normative justification from a wider responsibility to transform, rather than stabilise, oppressive social conditions. This responsibility demonstrates *why* reflexive practice is not an end in itself – this is the 'complicity clause'.[61] A responsibility framework is seen to confirm the different logics of change that guide the two aspects of praxis. Unlike the open-ended-melioristic goals of praxis's ultimate aims, the (perfectionist) goals of reflexive practice are clearly defined as the performance of epistemic conduct that minimises the theorist's complicity with the injustices under analysis. Thus, we see clearly *how* reflexive practice is not an end in itself but forms a part of a robust method of critique, enabling such a theory to contribute to transformative politics.

[60] Benhabib, 1987, 5

[61] This complicity clause derives from the reading of political responsibility developed in the writings of Maeve McKeown, Alison Jaggar, Corwin Aagon, and Barbara Applbaum.

Responsibility for reflexive practices – hereafter 'reflexive responsibility' – ensures that researchers are accountable, as sociologist Patricia Hill Collins describes, for their 'own taken-for-granted methodological assumptions that shape [their] critical theorising.'[62] It should be understood as a kind of epistemic responsibility as reflexive practice relates to how agents are held accountable for their knowledge practices.[63] As I now show, for the overarching purposes of this thesis, responsibilities provide an immanent way of evaluating accounts of reflexive practice. This is because complicity also operates at the level of liability regarding the conduct of reflexive practice as an instance of (backwards-facing) epistemic responsibility.

Epistemic responsibility attributes a degree of liability to persons for their conduct as givers and receivers of knowledge claims. In doing so, it views individuals as having a degree of agency over their capacity to receive, assess, and circulate knowledge claims, evaluating them according to standards such as whether they understand the positions they endorse, how scrupulous they are at judging new information they receive, or how open-minded they are to new information.[64] Epistemic responsibility, therefore, offers a platform to evaluate an epistemic character by providing a metric, as social epistemologist Lorraine Code argues, to 'attribute moral and intellectual integrity to people'[65] or 'condemn them as morally or intellectually careless.'[66] It does so because of a perfectionist structure, which enables us to identify clear epistemic goods to which reflexive practice is directed. When reflexive practice falls short of these immanent standards, this failure can be

[62] Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 153

[63] For example, Maeve Cooke's notion of rational accountability within Critical Theory, which she writes, 'This refers to the willingness and ability to take responsibility for one's actions, judgements, and self-interpretations in the sense of being able to explain and justify them to others, if need be' (138). See: Maeve Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

[64] Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility,* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020), 51

[65] Ibid

[66] Ibid, 44

understood as a failure to adequately execute its epistemic responsibilities to uphold the necessary standards of reflexive scrutiny.

Despite its individual focus, the liability structure of epistemic responsibility doesn't underplay the structural influences in socialisation into our epistemic practices. Thus, for instance, it can properly take into account the influence that long-term structures of marginalisation play in fostering an ignorance of the contingency of our dominant values.[67] Nor, to respond to Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.'s concerns, does such a structure build in the assumption that 'knowing well' is an exclusively individual achievement.[68] Instead, epistemic responsibility is a way of ascribing agency to a person over their epistemic character under conditions of situated knowing[69] to call out traits of laziness or willful ignorance of the kind captured by decolonial theorist Bonaventura de Sousa Santos in his description of the 'refusal to see' things from a perceptive other than that of a Western lens, despite access to alternative perspectives or information to the contrary.[70] Therefore, epistemic responsibility acknowledges the reality of situated knowing whereby persons are socialised into different communities with different values and privileges. But this, nevertheless, entails some responsibilities because agents are viewed as active rather than passive epistemic agents.

Reflexive responsibility, therefore, is a specific kind of epistemic responsibility indexed to the specific kind of epistemic activity of attuning ourselves to the presuppositions of our epistemic practices in order to remain critical of, rather than complicit with, the injustices under investigation. Because the performance of reflexive practice is distinguished from everyday epistemic practices, it acknowledges reflexive

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[67] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imagination,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 31

[68] Pohlhaus, Jr., 2017, 20

[69] Code, 2020, 51

[70] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide,* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 170

practice as a specific activity directed to a particular goal within the overall ambitions of a Critical Theory.[71] Reflexive practice is how complicity with privilege can be minimised. Reflexive practice confronts the dangers of complicity to hold open the possibility of contributing to the wider transformative aspirations of praxis.

Combining a perfectionist account of reflexive practice with a responsibility framework provides a way of evaluating the success of these responsibilities and thereby measuring alternate accounts of reflexive practice against one another. We can reconstruct a thin picture of the responsibilities entailed by reflexive practice from the account laid out thus far. If, as feminist epistemologist Sandra Harding summarises, reflexive practice is the 'mechanism for identifying the cultural values and interests of the researchers,'[72] then researchers are liable for performing methodological due diligence. For example, a commitment by certain Western feminists to the value of autonomy has led them to view the Islamic practice of wearing the veil as a de-facto oppressive violation of autonomy, thereby collapsing a distinction between a state-imposed requirement to wear the veil with an individual's decision to wear the veil. Reflexive scrutiny is the safety-check within diagnosis that scrutinises what does and does not appear salient or reasonable in a situation to see how these values of (assumed) salience and reasonableness may blind or hinder the critic's capacity to interpret the object of study.[73]

To consider reflexive responsibility in greater detail, we can appeal to two axes: the *depth* and *breadth* of reflexive practice. Questions of depth consider the due diligence involved and ask: how deep must the reflexive gaze go if we are to attune ourselves to what Seyla Benhabib describes as 'the presuppositions which underlie the constitution

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[71] Code, 2020, 62

[72] Sandra Harding, '"Strong Objectivity" and Socially Situated Knowledge' in, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991b), 138-63, 162

[73] Celikates, 2018, Epub

of subjectivity'?[74] What must we take as generalisable, and what is a product of the contingency of situated knowing and thus a threat to diagnosis? The standard construction of reflexive practice is that it scrutinises the critic's immediate attitudes to the situation at hand (their first-order attitudes) and their 'attitudes about attitudes', that is, the (second-order) presuppositions which the critic brings to inquiry.[75] Throughout this dissertation, I argue that such scrutiny must go deeper and consider wider parts of our epistemic character, as suggested by theorists who point to the habituated character of reflexive blocks, like Shannan Sullivan,[76] is not reducible to second-order blockages. We must consider, for example, the immediate features of one's epistemic situation, such as how the credibility of an academic Critical Theorist with higher education degrees and institutional affiliations means their published insights carry more social authority and influence than the experiences they write for. Patricia Hill Collins summarises this epistemic responsibility which extends to scrutiny 'about *both* its own practices *and* how its social location within power relations shape those practises.'[77] Thus, our epistemic responsibility must extend deeper than the standard construction allows by going beyond cognitive blockages to consider the wider epistemic standpoint and influence of research.

The second axis to evaluate reflexive practice is that of breadth. Recognising this axis puts pressure on the sufficiency of exploring our immediate epistemic practices. Reflexivity, on this broader account, as Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond argue, 'entails much more than observing how one's social position affects scientific analyses or the political imagination.'[78] This expanded scrutiny considers how

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[74] Benhabib, 1987, 45

[75] Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 3

[76] See: Sullivan, Shannon, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006)

[77] Hill Collins, 2019, 64

[78] Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond, 'Race and Reflexivity' in, *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* (Vol. 35: No. 4, 2012), 574-99, 577

the tools or institutional settings of analysis can constrain an ability to analyse societies. Regarding tools, it has been argued that the framework through which reflexive practice proceeds ought to be challenged, and the methods that guide Critical Theory should never be construed as 'finished projects', but open to contestation.[79] This means that the framework itself must be questioned in reflexive practice and open to revision, which philosopher Kristie Dotson described as a third-order critique. Although Dotson is concerned with how our overarching conceptual frameworks and institutions can entrench forms of complicity in the form of epistemic injustice, the basic intuition that our reflexive gaze should involve 'developing the capacity to recognise and alter elements of operative, instituted social imaginaries that inform and preserve organizational schemata,' remains prescient.[80] Dotson's concern is that even when reflexivity attends to second-order features of our values or even reflects on first-order points of the theorist's social context, the method appropriate to analysis is too often left unchecked. The issue for Dotson, therefore, is that the feedback loop of reflexive practice rarely extends so far to the method of critique. For example, in Khader's work on decolonising feminist theory, we find repeated examples of work that maintain a commitment to standpoint theory and thereby recognise the partiality of epistemic claims but fail to subject their normative frameworks to similar scrutiny.

This second issue of breadth requires the critic to explore how the institutions they participate in influence one's epistemic character and contribute to the researcher's standpoint. As the criminologists, Karen Lumsden and Aaron Winter describe, in the context of qualitative research in criminology, reflexivity:

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[79] Hill Collins, 2019, 120

[80] Kristie Dotson, 'Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression' in, *Social Epistemology*, (Vol. 28: No. 2, 2014), 115-38, 30

> [I]s a process, permeating all aspects of the research from selection of the research topic, search for funding, access to and estrangement with participants and settings, data collection, analysis interpretation, dissemination, application of findings and our theoretical and methodological location.[81]

This issue also bears upon Critical Theory since the discipline regards the theorist as a participant observer, like an ethnographer. As recent work in Critical Theory by Lois McNay and Bernard Harcourt has explored, the transformative and collaborative claims of Critical Theorists are too often undermined by the restrictive academic contexts in which theoretical research is conducted. It is captured tellingly by Hill Collins on how the standpoint of the researcher influences the sort of projects and questions they may ask:

> [S]pecialised thought challenging notions of Black female inferiority is unlikely to be generated from within White-male-controlled academic settings because both the kinds of questions asked and the answers to them would necessarily reflect a basic lack of familiarity with Black women's realities.[82]

This aspect of breadth, therefore, directs the reflexive gaze to the practical institutional context in which the work is written, such as the audiences for whom the work is produced, and the barriers raised by the institutional context to meaningful collaboration between the theorist and non-theorist.

Connecting the possible approaches to reflexive practice along the two axes of reflexive responsibility is the depth of epistemic responsibility of scrutiny, which can be illustrated when considered alongside alternative methods, such as reflective equilibrium. In its standard construction, reflective equilibrium is an effort to test our

[81] Karen Lumsden and Aaron Winter, 'Reflexivity in Criminological Research' in, *Reflexivity in Criminological Research: Experiences with the Powerful and the Powerless* (eds. Karen Lumsden and Aaron Winter), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-19, 2

[82] Hill Collins, 2009, 272

moral beliefs by placing them in relation to moral principles under particular problem situations.[83] But several philosophers have extended it to evaluate the reasonableness of our epistemic beliefs. In our evaluation of epistemic claims, via reflective equilibrium, we place our judgments into balance with principles and try to establish this balance between them. For example, in evaluating credibility, our first-order values are questioned rather than the principles that justify those values themselves. Like reflexive practice, reflective equilibrium, therefore, serves as a self-correcting activity that scrutinises beliefs we take to be given insofar as it assesses the objectivity, or epistemic validity, of our judgments.[84] Furthermore, like reflexive practice, reflective equilibrium is an 'imperfect epistemic procedure' as they rely on imperfect tools (our existing views and positions) to cast judgments. Thus, the procedure's outcomes are provisional and potentially wrong.[85] What separates these two reflective practices is the depth of scrutiny they engender. Because reflective equilibrium aims for coherence and reasonableness between our first- and second-order epistemic beliefs, it cannot properly scrutinise the second-order beliefs themselves, let alone take the possibility of third-order concerns into account. It is, thereby, less capable than reflexive practice to interrogate the risks of situated reason, namely, the impact of social and political influences on epistemic coherence. In interrogating the legacy of colonialism on hierarchies of knowledge, reflective equilibrium would be incapable of making room for different ways of seeing by enlarging the present or the reasonable beyond Western forms of rationality.[86]

If reflective equilibrium is understood as reaching reasonable conclusions, then the basic epistemic responsibility of reflexive practice goes further by placing the

[83] Norman Daniels, *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2

[84] Catherin Z. Elgin, *True Enough,* (London: The MIT Press, 2017), 12

[85] Ibid, 15

[86] de Sousa Santos, 2008, 168 and 175

notion of reasonableness under scrutiny. In this respect, reflexive scrutiny brings to light the power relations that frame the subject's relation to the object, ensuring that our judgments are made in full awareness of the assumptions that frame our concrete perspectives.[87] Thus, the scrutiny is not limited to the plausibility of the judgment but to the metric of the judgement itself. Reflexive practice, then, attempts to prevent an attitude to research that sees it as simplistically engaged with the external world or that world as being an object of study to a dispassionate observer.

Thus, I have argued that reflexive practice is a safety-check that helps to keep the emancipatory ambitions of the theorists in check by raising the researcher's awareness of the possibilities that their work might become complicit in the social forces they seek to critique. But equally important is the influence of the theorist's emancipatory ambitions upon their reflexive practice. Without the aspiration for social change, or the motivation to contribute to political struggles against oppression, the researcher's self-reflection is uncoupled from their political ambitions. Thus, once a theorist's connection to an emancipatory orientation has been severed, the epistemic responsibility to reduce the negative influence of our presuppositions, which I have argued ought to guide our reflexive practices, loses its normative justification. Under these conditions, reflexive practice could easily become a circular cognitive activity separated from any larger critical ambition.

Much more concerning, were reflexive practice to be tied to conservative or oppressive political commitments, acts of self-reflection that illuminate the advantages of one's social group in relation to another, and the biases that one has developed as a result, could be used to contribute to social analyses that seek to stabilise or exacerbate existing inequalities. For example, even certain traditional liberal outlooks that

[87] Michell Orthipp, 'Keeping and Using Reflexive Journals in the Qualitative Research Process' in*, The Qualitative Report,* (Vol. 13: No. 4, 2008), 695-705, 702

promote individual responsibility within financial markets would be unlikely to consider as requiring exclusion the influence of any meritocratic biases they might harbour. Instead, these (unchallenged) meritocratic opinions might be viewed as justification for upholding social relations as they are. In circumstances of this kind, reflexive practice would indeed promote forms of research that would be what I have termed 'irresponsible' social research. Thus, it is best to understand the influence of reflexivity and emancipatory ambition as a relationship of mutual influence – as a dialectic – in which each supports the other to promote the reflexive and emancipatory ambitions of Critical Theory.

In the second half of this Chapter, I place the standard laid out here account of reflexive practice under scrutiny, by exploring reflexive practice in the tradition of thought associated with the history of Critical Theory. If reflexive practice is an interrogation of our 'valuation responses to the world' in the situated aspect of evaluations,[88] then, I will demonstrate that evaluating Critical Theory's use of reflective practice reveals the limitations that arise from an exclusively second-order account of reflection. As I suggest, to become aware of the assumptions and habits that make up one's epistemic character, more scrutiny has to be placed on the sufficiency of second-order analysis.

## III. THE CRITICAL ATTITUDE

The concept of reflexivity has been central to work associated with Critical Theory, and yet, no single account of reflexive practice is shared by those associated with the tradition.[89] This plurality would seem to derail attempts at offering a general critique

[88] Anderson, 1993, 3 and 8
[89] See Harcourt, 2020, 45

of Critical Theory's approach to reflexive practice. Indeed, this thesis demonstrates how reflexive practice has been pursued in a variety of Kantian, Left-Hegelian, aesthetic, and, as I propose in the concluding chapter, I propose, cultivational approaches.[90] Despite these differences, Horkheimer's account of 'the critical attitude' and Jürgen Habermas's brief flirtation with psychoanalysis provides a common thread that runs through the conduct of reflexive practice in Critical Theory. Horkheimer's core insight into the relations between reason, society, and reflexivity presents reflexive practice as the means by which the researcher achieves epistemic autonomy from their second-order values. Introducing Horkheimer's concept of the critical attitude thus offers the means by which to identify the reflexive responsibilities of Critical Theory that inform the more recent accounts of reflexive practice in Critical Theory, which are outlined in the rest of this thesis.

In his 1937 essay, 'Critical Theory and Traditional Theory,' Horkheimer presents the importance of reflexive practice to Critical Theory by means of a contrast to what he calls 'Traditional Theory'. In his estimation, the premise of Traditional Theory is that the social sciences can replicate the controlled conditions of the natural sciences. He believes this assumption rests on a misguided 'positivist' understanding of the nature of our epistemic practices, according to which there is a strict distinction between the epistemic practices of apprehending facts and the normative practices of invoking social values.[91] In Traditional Theory, this fact-value binary promotes a method of inquiry in which the researcher confronts society as a detached observer, whose 'continuous interaction with that given world, is seen by the perceiver as a sum-total of facts.'[92] Horkheimer considers this framework misguided because it takes our

[90] Fabian Freyenhagen, 'What is Orthodox Critical Theory?' in, *World Picture,* (Vol. 12: No. 4, 2017), 1-11, 2
[91] Thompson, 2017, 152
[92] Horkheimer, 1975, 199

epistemic practices to be fixed and a given that 'must be accepted.'[93] In doing so, it promotes a method of social analysis that lacks reflexive safety checks to protect the researcher from the steering effects of second-order values. The upshot is that Traditional Theories risk engendering forms of complicity.

Distancing himself from Tradition Theory's aspirations to emulate the methods of natural sciences, Horkheimer argues that Critical Theory should attend to 'the question of the mediation of the factual through the activity of society as a whole.'[94] Horkheimer's answer to the question of *how* the factual is mediated is that our epistemic practices are not abstracted from the influence of societies but mediated by them and are thereby liable to represent the dominant presuppositions of society.[95] Thus, where Traditional Theory assumed the possibility of a neutral epistemic perspective in research, Horkheimer considers 'the self-knowledge of present-day men is not a mathematical knowledge of nature which claims to be the eternal logos.'[96] Instead, Horkheimer understands the rationality that underwrites epistemic practices as a product of their social-historical context.[97] Thus, for Horkheimer, our epistemic practices are an effect of a society's productive relations. He argues that the set of epistemic practices 'has always functioned as a non-independent moment in the work process.'[98]

While Horkheimer's Marxist explanation for this epistemology of mediation is no longer supported by current Critical Theorists, the essential insight it offers into the relations between reason, reflexivity, and social criticism continues to influence accounts of reflexive practice in Critical Theory. This insight maintains that forms of

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[93] Ibid

[94] Ibid, 201

[95] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 65

[96] Horkheimer, 1975, 198

[97] Hoy and McCarthy, 1994, 8

[98] Horkheimer, 1975, 212

rational self-understanding are not like abstract mathematical truths but are like 'rules of conduct' and 'inherited ways of life' that change according to the social-historical context.[99] This epistemic proposal relies on an understanding of reason as situated and 'socially effective.'[100] To describe reason as socially effective is to claim that it is not abstracted from the social world but immanent to it and that the material world frames the modes of human understanding, which is congruent to some degree with a hermeneutic account of situated knowledge.[101] This description has two consequences that resonate with Critical Theory today and allows us to identify the liability structure of reflexive practice and the perfectionist goods to which reflexive practice aspires.

The first consequence is that, given its situatedness, social research must include a willingness to scrutinise their inherited presuppositions. Because the researcher's tools of analysis rely on frames of interpretation drawn from society, Horkheimer is concerned about the 'the influence of the measuring instrument […] upon the object being observed.'[102] Thus, reason might be the tribunal, but our attempts to practise reasoning can be distorted in myriad ways, including failure to acknowledge racial and gender matters. Horkheimer's epistemic framework, therefore, sets the stage for reflexive practice.

Philosophically, Horkheimer follows G. W. F. Hegel's socialisation of Immanuel Kant's account of schematism. Where Kant argued that the empirical world is filtered through fixed categories in the mind, Hegel (and Horkheimer) maintained that these categories are social rather than a priori.[103] The result of this position is the recognition that our second-order values, which frame our (first-order) immediate

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[99] Ibid, 232

[100] Axel Honneth, 'A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory' in, *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* (ed. Fred Rush), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 336-60, 327

[101] Sandra Harding, 'What is Feminist Epistemology' in, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991a), 105-37, 120

[102] Horkheimer, 1975, 201

[103] Code, 2006*,* 9

experience of the world, are themselves mediated through social categories, which alter the depth of self-reflection necessary for responsible acts of self-understanding.[104] This is captured in Benhabib's description of reflexive practice in Hegel:

> Reason is a self-reflexive capacity: it entails comprehending not only the object of cognition but the interaction between subject and object as well. Reason entails cognitive discovery as well as practical rationality.[105]

Benhabib's reconstruction of Hegel points to acts of reflection in which the neutrality of the agent is placed in doubt, and the influences they bring to reflection are themselves placed under scrutiny. Horkheimer presents a similar understanding of reflexive practice through 'the critical attitude', which aims to make reason 'become transparent to itself.'[106]

But where Hegel's 'cognitive discovery' sought to achieve a cognitive reconciliation in which an individual achieves a level of self-understanding that allows us to recognise the world as 'rational', Horkheimer's use of reflexive practice follows Karl Marx by seeking to disenchant the agent from this world and expose the tendencies which entrench forms of structural injustice. Only by engaging in this distancing can the critic seek to avoid the complicity risked by those guided by Traditional Theory.

This helps us to understand the responsibilities that guide the sort of reflexive practice suggested by Horkheimer's critical attitude. Horkheimer proposes a heightened form of scepticism, which 'runs counter to prevailing habits of thought.'[107]

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[104] Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (2nd ed), (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1996), 81

[105] Benhabib, 1987, 81

[106] Horkheimer, 1975, 207

[107] Ibid, 218

The critical attitude is enacted by means of 'radically question[ing]' and taking an oppositional stance to 'any specific theoretical content' implies that the researcher can maintain an autonomous perspective on the social influence upon their reasoning.[108] Due to the changing conditions of socially effective reason, Horkheimer insists on the recursive character of reflexive practice and contends that 'the thinker must constantly be beginning anew.'[109] In this respect, responsible critical conduct doesn't take its findings for granted but acknowledges their fallibility by continuing to scrutinise its findings and methods, actively repeating its activity.

The recursivity of the critical attitude illuminates the epistemic good of autonomy to which the reflexive practice is directed. Achieving transparency amounts to gaining a semi-autonomous epistemic perspective upon the situated character of one's reasoning; it, therefore, amounts to an effort to untangle – even if only momentarily – our presuppositions from social forces to enable researchers to enter into a position from which they can scrutinise the social influences upon their epistemic practices.[110] But due to the ever-changing conditions under which reasoning takes place – for example, how feedback from the world might throw certain theoretical assumptions into doubt – Horkheimer believes our analysis is always vulnerable to deception and entanglement with the social forces under scrutiny. The critical attitude must be taken up continuously in research to maintain an autonomous perspective in changing circumstances. Recursivity is, therefore, a way of maintaining the autonomous character that undergirds Horkheimer's account of the critical attitude.

[108] Ibid, 207, 232, and 234
[109] Ibid
[110] Ibid

The need to achieve autonomy provides one with a metric against which to evaluate the perfectionist character of reflexive practice in Critical Theory. This insight, drawn from Horkheimer's account of the critical attitude, can be given more clarity by supplementing it with the young Jürgen Habermas's psychoanalytic account of reflexive practice. The younger Habermas situated the critical attitude and the effort to promote autonomous thinking within the context of Freudian psychoanalysis. The influence of Sigmund Freud upon Habermas, and other Critical Theorists, was not limited to Freud's emphasis on the 'contamination' of rationality,[111] but extended to the similarities Habermas identified between the method of reflection undergone by a person during analysis and the critic's method of reflexive practice.

In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), Habermas endorses the core methodological aspect of Freudian psychoanalysis – hereafter referred to simply as *analysis* – and promotes a 'model' that critical self-reflection should draw upon for inspiration.[112] Habermas turns to psychoanalysis to explain how reflexive practice can work through the blockages – 'dogmatic attitudes'[113] – that obstruct the critic due to situated rationality. Habermas reads Freud as suggesting that contaminated reason destabilises the process of self-reflection and thereby undermines the agent's autonomy over their rational capabilities to the extent that agents can no longer *appropriate* parts of themselves.[114] As Amy Allen explains, for Habermas, the purpose of analysis is to make explicit 'those portions of our life history that have been alienated, split off, or repressed.'[115] The process is destabilised because of 'blocks to consciousness,' which allow the individual to become 'penetrat[ed by] false

[111] Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 12

[112] Ibid, 82; Amy Allen, *Critique on the Couch: Why Critical Theory Needs Psychoanalysis,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020), 22

[113] Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro), (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 233

[114] Ibid

[115] Allen, 2020, 154

objectivations.'[116] What is valuable in appealing to the good of autonomy in analysis and Critical Theory is that each it bridges first- and second-order theories[117] by highlighting the limitations that the background conditions place on our epistemic practices.[118] Analysis fosters agency in the form of autonomous reflective practice, which enables a renewed degree of autonomy on the part of the patient. The method of psychoanalysis draws our attention to barriers that hinder successful self-reflection. The psychoanalytic method brings into focus the epistemic good of autonomy that analysis and the critical attitude each seek. An emphasis on the psychoanalytic heritage of Critical Theory, therefore, serves to emphasise the perfectionism underpinning its reflexive practice.

The final benefit of the analogy to analysis is that it brings out the local transformative aspect of Critical Theory. It highlights that one practical effect of reflexive practice is to change the epistemic conduct of the critic. While Habermas describes the 'immediate therapeutic results' as being 'the critical overcoming of blocks to consciousness,'[119] what is attractive about the analysis-method is that the outcome of analysis is understood to achieve more than just the correction of a reflective blockage. Habermas is turning to psychoanalysis to demonstrate the procedural aspects of autonomy and self-reflection and the ethical and practical similarities between the theorist/analyst and subject/patient. For Habermas, the end-goal of analysis is not the discrete knowledge uncovered but the autonomous process of self-reflection achieved by attending to the blockage. Citing Freud, Habermas illustrates the connection: 'The pathological factor is not his ignorance in itself, but the root of this ignorance in his inner resistances.'[120] Thus, the epistemic good of autonomy

[116] Habermas, 1987, 233
[117] Celikates, 2018, Ch. 3, Epub
[118] Ibid
[119] Habermas, 1987, 233
[120] Ibid, 229

describes a procedural rather than a substantial good.[121] Psychoanalysis, therefore, illuminates the purpose of reflexive practice and the kind of agency in the praxis. Critical disclosure is not something taught or received, but a process worked through by the agent through critical reflection. Thus, analysis promoted an account of self-reflection that is transformative.

However, as I demonstrate in the final chapter of this dissertation, the concept of the critical attitude and the good of autonomy entrench too narrow and shallow an account of reflexive practice, one that gives too much emphasis to issues of second-order blockages. I argue that such a framework of reflexive practice is unable to remain reflexive to less cognitive features of our epistemic lives, such as our perceived epistemic credibility, which, as a result, risks enacting complicit forms of analysis. I conclude that Critical Theory has failed to live up to its reflexive responsibilities: it performs irresponsible critique. This second-order framework produces irresponsible critique that is too shallow to remain reflexive to non-cognitive influences on the researcher and too narrow to consider the limitations of the second-order framework.

## IV. IRRESPONSIBLE REFLEXIVE PRACTICE

Guiding the central goal of autonomy in Critical Theory's account of reflexive practice is a commitment to making reason central to social criticism. Reason enables Critical Theory to remain immanent to social conditions, but also to cast judgement on what it considers to be unjust social practices. As Martin Jay, a historian of the Frankfurt School, has described, for Critical Theory reason is the 'tribunal' which evaluates the

[121] Celikates, 2018, Ch. 3, Epub

present and provides insight into how societies can be transformed.[122] While there are deep differences in Critical Theory regarding the scope of 'reason',[123] what unites Critical Theory as a tradition is a faith it places in reason. Reason is understood as generalisable, allowing the theorist to make claims that carry validity beyond their immediate context that would be unavailable by appeals to concepts like 'the good'.[124] In this section, the particular ways Critical Theorists have construed context-transcendence will be shown to undermine Critical Theory's reflexive responsibilities. It produces too formal a picture of critique, centred on cognitive concerns of pathological instances of socially effective reason, which risk misdiagnosing social injustices as fundamentally connected to second-order blockages.[125]

The shallowness of Critical Theory's reflexive practice is brought into focus through its connection to the method of 'immanent criticism'. In general, criticism is simply an evaluation of something: we judge an object against a standard. For example, an 'external' criticism judges something against a criterion independent of the object: think of an examination mark scheme or the Ten Commandments. However, this kind of criticism will not meet the reflexive requirements of a Critical Theory, since its

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[122] Jay, 1996, 61

[123] Martin Jay has drawn a helpful distinction between a narrower and a broader accounts of rationality in Critical Theory, using the *dianoetic* and *noetic* forms reason. To conceive of reason in narrow-dianoetic terms is to restrict it to what is justified and well-grounded through an inferential process of reasoning. *Subjectively*, a narrow account of reason is akin to a particular and superior faculty of individuals that is separate from other faculties such as the imagination; *objectively*, it is used to describe certain fixed characteristics of reality, such as scientific objectivity. A narrow definition is taken up by Jürgen Habermas and Rainer Forst to distinguish reason from 'other' pre-cognitive or intuitive experiences. But those who appeal to a broader-noetic account of reason claim that the narrow account underplays the significance of modes of reception in which we register understanding in ways other than deductive reasoning. They refer to a more intuitive grasp of the world, whereby the individual takes part and is submerged *within* the world, rather than operating as an objective observer and 'truths that are disclosed, brought to light, made present, rather than the result of analysis, constitution, or reflection.' See Martin Jay, *Reason After Its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory,* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 9-15

[124] Rainer Forst, 'Introduction: Orders of Justification: On the Relationship Between Philosophy, Social Theory, and Criticism' in, *Normativity and Power: Analyzing Social Orders of Justification* (trans. Ciaran Cronin), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-20, 3

[125] Sally Haslanger, Culture and Critique' in, *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, (Vol. 91: No.1, 2017), 149-73, 155

analysis steps outside of the concrete situations under investigation and the (external) criteria of evaluation is not under the same degree of scrutiny as that directed at the object itself. A more appropriate form of criticism, Critical Theorists have argued, would be one where the standard for judgment derives from the object itself, and we evaluate something 'on its own terms.'[126] This is the form of criticism which comprises immanent critique.

In evaluating socially effective reason 'on its own terms', the Critical Theorist assesses whether a society's 'rules of conduct' and 'inherited ways of life', as Horkheimer described them, live up to the standards they set for themselves.[127] Steeped in Marxian accounts of ideology critique, the objective of a Critical Theory here is to assess the levels of social reflexivity by diagnosing the discrepancies between dominant understandings of the social world and the reality of those practices. As Benhabib describes it in the work of Karl Marx:

> Marx contrasts the normative self-understanding of this society to the actual social relations prevailing in it, without appealing to a different set of norms from the ones immanent in bourgeois society.[128]

Benhabib captures the essence of this project of critique as one geared towards evaluating the norms and values that underpin our social practices. The project is, therefore, preoccupied with issues of the second-order.

Directing the reflexive ambitions of Critical Theory's praxis is a similar concern with the values that underpin – and are therefore immanent to – our social practices. At a general level, therefore, immanent critique points to how diagnosis is always a

[126] James Gordon Finlayson, 'Hegel, Adorno and the Origins of Immanent Critique' in, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, (Vol. 22: No. 6, 2014), 1142-66, 1143-4

[127] Horkheimer, 1975, 232

[128] Benhabib, 1987, 107-8

situated activity: it takes place in the social world, it uses tools – those gathered under the umbrella term 'rationality' – that have been shaped by the particular context, and it directs its inquiry to the underlying condition of society. In Rahel Jaeggi's account of immanent critique, for example, these rules of conduct take the form of social norms or 'value orientations or ideals,'[129] and the 'inherited' aspect refers to the immanence of these ideals. As Jaeggi explains, the norm is not 'an external standard', such as our 'expectations' or aspirations of how the norm should act in society.[130] Instead, it is the exposure that the norm 'does not correspond to *its own concept.*'[131]

This is clear in Horkheimer's own estimation that Critical Theory's engagement with obstacles of the second-order is not a theory of illusions or dismissing false consciousness. It is, rather, a commitment to assess the present levels of reason available in present society rather than assume that adequate levels of reason are available if only we could see them. Hill Collins describes this well in her assessment of Horkheimer, writing:

> [H]e argues that critical theory does not dismiss the reality of the social world as it *appears* to individuals. The mode in which social life appears is an indication of the extent to which individuals are alienated from their own social praxis.[132]

The alienation Hill Collins alludes to here, is a so-called 'reflexivity deficit', or 'second-order blockage',[133] which refers to an inability to recognise the values underpinning our epistemic and broader social practices. Thus, if the role of immanent critique is to identify, evaluate, and disclose second-order blockages, then the purpose of competent

[129] Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life* (trans. Ciaran Cronin), (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2018), 190
[130] Ibid, 131
[131] Ibid
[132] Hill Collins, 2019, 4
[133] Celikates, 2018, Ch. 3, Epub

reflexive practice is to attune the researchers to these blockages to ensure they achieve some autonomy from the influence of second-order blockages.

But the underlying assumption of immanent critique, that a second-order standard capable of producing criticism which transcends its context can be identified raises difficulties for performing responsible reflexive practice. Fixating on second-order matters produces too narrow an analysis, as it elevates the cognitive aspects of social injustices whilst seriously underplaying the impact that material, first-order experience has both on the lived experience subjects of critique and the interpretative interests of the researcher. I now introduce two risks of complicity that reflexive practice ought to avoid if it is to remain responsible, which I explore in Chapters Two, Three, and Four with respect to recent Critical Theory.

The first risk is that Critical Theory may overstate the value of autonomy as an epistemic good (and that this will limit the depth of reflexive practice). As I explain in Chapter Five regarding the work of Robin Celikates, autonomy overplays both the ability to gain genuine distance from our epistemic presuppositions, as well as the desirability of such autonomy. An emphasis on autonomy can often promote an account of presuppositions as being strictly pathological rather than viewing them as being potentially productive, as W. E. B. Du Bois points to this in his account of 'double consciousness'.

The second risk of irresponsibility is a *shallow* form of reflexive practice. The fixation with second-order issues has led recent work in Critical Theory to pursue forms of reflexive practice that are overly cognitive and fail to scrutinise the pre-cognitive effects that ideologies, such as racialisation, have upon the critic. As explored throughout this dissertation, racialisation does not merely entrench itself on the base of mistaken second-order concepts or values about different groups of people. The strength that racialisation has over our outlooks also relies on the influence that pre-

cognitive effects, such as stereotypes or undeserved credibility, have on our interpretations, as have been studied by phenomenologists of race, like George Yancy, Helen Ngo, and Shannon Sullivan. But reflexive practice can only attune the critic to such pre-cognitive influences when self-reflection goes deeper than the cognitive level of second-order blockages and sets itself epistemic goals beyond mere autonomy.

For example, as shown in Chapter Three, Rahel Jaeggi's recent development of immanent critique reveals the cost of ignoring salience. Diagnosing forms of life problems are described by Jaeggi as a subjective process of 'perceiving' problems *as* problems.[134] Jaeggi contends that the critic must diagnose a problem before subjecting it to immanent critique. But since this is a 'constructive process' out of which 'very different shapes could be extracted.'[135] Jaeggi's account of diagnosis is rooted in an idea of interpretation assuming a neutral, anonymous knowing subject. The kind of self-awareness necessary for accurate diagnosis is ungendered or unracialised in Jaeggi's work. Further, Jaeggi does not suggest how – even on a formal level – the critic might factor these aspects of identity into her account of self-awareness since she fails to address how social location affects the coherence of the epistemic interpretation of forms of life. This illustrates a lack of depth in the account of reflexive practice.

Finally, Critical Theory's steadfast commitment to second-order blockages also induces a risk of breadth. The concern here is that by pursuing too formal an approach to analysis, which grounds the project of critique in existing norms of reality, Critical Theory fails to consider different tools (methods) of analysis besides those relating to the second-order analysis.[136] An effect of this risk is a failure of Critical Theory to

[134] Jaeggi, 2018, 141
[135] Ibid, 143
[136] Haslanger, 2017, 155

consider different theoretical frameworks and paradigms besides its own (becoming a sort of theoretical echo chamber as a result). This is akin to McNay's and Harcourt's criticisms that Critical Theory has become paradigm-focused (solving problems and inconsistencies within a particular framework), rather than focusing on social problems and using the relevant tools to address them. The bigger picture reveals a risk to reflexive breadth. By reducing reflexive practice to theoretical knowledge, Critical Theory may become too narrow as it fails to take stock of 'third-order problems'. As discussed earlier, third-order problems are instances when the tools and remedies are a part of the problem; even when our methods are working optimally, they may contribute to the exclusion of certain resources.[137] As Pohlhaus Jr. captures it, third-order exclusions occur: 'when an epistemic system is functioning properly and is sufficiently developed, but the system, itself is altogether inadequate to a particular epistemic task.'[138] Thus, Critical Theory's narrow reflexive gaze further undermines its reflexive responsibility as it risks overlooking the unsuitability of its methods. It risks ignoring the basic fact that, as Hill Collins argues, it is our 'methodological assumptions that shape [our] critical theorising.'[139]

These three risks of theorising without enough epistemic responsibility are used to guide the critiques that make up this dissertation. They serve to show how we can view Critical Theory's methods as irresponsible. As laid out in this chapter, a responsibility framework shows them to be irresponsible since their diagnoses obstruct a deeper understanding of social injustices.

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[137] Kristie Dotson, 'A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression' in, *Frontiers*, (Vol. 33: No. 1, 2012), 24-47, 31-2

[138] Pohlhaus, Jr., 2017, 20

[139] Hill Collins, 2019, 153

# V. CONCLUSIONS

Reflexive responsibilities have been explained in relation to Critical Theory's vision of praxis. This vision sees diagnosis as contributing to the alleviation of suffering and the possibility of new social formations and improved attunement to the structural conditions which produce these injustices and the lived experiences. I've argued that poor epistemic practice is understood to destabilise the relation to practice and risks becoming complicit. A perfectionist framework enables more focus on the responsibilities in terms of the goods to which it aims and, by extension, provides a framework for evaluating the method of critique as *irresponsible*. I now turn to the work of Kantian Critical Theorist Rainer Forst, to put my responsibility framework into practice.

# CHAPTER TWO

## *REFLEXIVITY AND JUSTIFICATION*

# Chapter Two

## Reflexivity and Justification

The Movement for Black Lives was built upon decades of argument that local injustices attributed to police violence could be extrapolated to make general claims about policing that extended beyond the singular injustice. Rather than viewing Officer Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd in 2020, or off-duty officer George Zimmerman's murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, as the actions of 'bad apples', or frame the death of Breanna Taylor, who police shot through the door of her apartment in 2020, as 'unfortunate collateral,'[1] supporters of the Movement for Black Lives used these extreme events to direct public attention to the every-day, even mundane, effects of living under forms of structural injustice. This structural lens shows how the quotidian function of institutions, such as policing, exacerbates specific social relations that underpin the capitalist economy. What emerged is an account of the lived experience of structural injustice, characterised by intersecting injustices that, in turn, predictably affect the lives of certain groups. The Black Lives Matter chants of 'I Can't Breathe' attested to the complexity of these injustices, that these injustices blur any single point of origin, and culminate in the experience of suffocation. If a Critical Theory is to live up to its emancipatory ambitions and to support political struggles, then it must be capable of providing insight into such complex social relations. Achieving this requires responsible reflexive practice.

In this chapter, I engage with the Kantian tradition of Critical Theory that builds upon the work of Jürgen Habermas. I do this by engaging in the work of Rainer

[1] See: Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, Andrea J. Ritchie, Rachel Anspach, Rachel Gilmer and Luke Harris, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women*, (New York, NY: African American Policy Forum, 2015)

Forst. Forst is worthy of discussion because he places so much significance on reflexivity. Forst promotes Critical Theory as a situated activity that must begin its diagnosis with our social practices.[2] Forst insists that Critical Theory emancipatory contribution emerges from rational insight, rather than affective bonds, feelings, or membership.[3] The 'rational insight' of Forst's project is to connect emancipatory struggles to foundational violations of human dignity, which occur when persons fail to receive justification in discourse.[4] What would make relations of racialised policing unjustifiable, for example, would be that actions of targeted surveillance and incarceration that violate a human's fundamental right to autonomy since the victims of police action are acted upon without a right to justification.

While the unjustifiability of racialised policing is undoubtedly a source of frustration and anger, Forst's approach to studying injustice in terms of justifiability mischaracterises the complexity of structural injustices. I argue that Forst's fixation on making relations of reciprocal justification the roots of our social practices undermines his expressed commitment to reflexivity. I demonstrate how Forst's commitment to Critical Theory's reflexive and emancipatory ambitions, for all its apparent theoretical rigour, cannot meet the task of collaborating with political struggles and contributing to removing unjust social relations.[5] Instead, Forst's approach to Critical Theory becomes an example of irresponsible critique.

Having outlined Forst's approach to Critical Theory in Section One, I point to three ways in which putting the focus on relations of justification produce reflexively irresponsible outcomes. First, I argue that Forst's reduction of injustices to second-

[2] Rainer Forst, 'Justifying Justifications: Reply to My Critics' in, *Justice, Democracy, and the Right to Justification: Rainer Forst in Dialogue* (ed. Rainer Forst), (London: Bloomsbury, 2014a), 169-219, 179

[3] Rainer Forst, *Justification and Critique: Towards a Critical Theory of Politics* (trans. Ciaran Cronin), (Cambridge: Polity, 2014b), 7

[4] Ibid

[5] Rainer Forst, 'First Things First: Redistribution, Recognition and Justification' in, *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays* (ed. Danielle Petherbridge), (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 303-19, 315

order violations of the right to justification underplays the complexity of structural injustices. Reducing the explanatory significance of first-order injustices, such as poverty, undermines the diagnostic accuracy of Forst's Critical Theory. Second, I question the validity of Forst's account of justification by showing how his diagnoses could produce false positives. This risks producing reflexively irresponsible outcomes since unjust institutions could receive justification without achieving the human dignity that Forst appeals to. Finally, in Section Four, I explain why Forst's reflexive practice depends upon an uncritical relation between the theorist and reason, whereby reason is assumed to be autonomous of power relations. This proves to be the fundamental problem with Forst's framework and is what allows him to place so much faith in justification. Forst's method leads to an inadequate and misleading account of responsible reflective practice that does not aid Critical Theory's ultimate aim of collaboration in social change. A reflexively responsible Critical Theory requires a sceptical appreciation of its method and tools and must take stock of third-order methodological issues. Since Forst's Critical Theory ignores this, it must be deemed to be reflexively irresponsible.

## I. FORST'S THINGS FIRST

Forst considers Critical Theory to be reflexively responsible when the theorist directs their analysis to the foundations of injustice. Forst inherits this conviction from Habermas, sharing his belief that Critical Theory requires a normative foundation capable of withstanding charges of relativism to judge social injustices and point to forms of social transformation.[6] In Forst's estimation, Critical Theory must be able to

[6] Forst therefore accepts ethical pluralism, but rejects moral pluralism. As he writes in *Toleration in Conflict,* the basic grounds of morality cannot be challenged and 'should rest on a shareable foundation.' See: Rainer

raise moral claims about what's suitable for all insofar as we are humans[7] rather than limiting itself to ethical claims about what's appropriate for the members of a particular community (rooted in traditions and histories).[8] Thus, the impact of Forst's moral turn in Critical Theory on reflexive practice is that he judges diagnoses as accurate insofar as they can point to a shared normative foundation and illuminate how it has been violated.

Forst's commitment to directing reflexive practice to moral violations takes his project in a Kantian direction. Like Habermas, Forst concludes that normative foundations should be constructed through a Kantian understanding of human autonomy secured through the 'self-sufficient and unpolluted' character of reason.[9] Central to the Kantian account of autonomy is a person's capacity to self-legislate their actions rationally,[10] such that they become a universal legislator of objective laws.[11] What gives self-legislation normative force is that it is reached through individual rational self-reflection without support from outside the process of practical reason, for instance, without the need to appeal to such matters as subjective ends.[12] Acting with moral autonomy is achieved through a process of 'constructivism,'[13] which conceives of moral claims not as 'objective' facts independent of persons but as things

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Forst, *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present* (trans. Ciaran Cronin), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 458

[7] Thomas McCarthy, 'Kantian Constructivism and Reconstructivism: Rawls and Habermas in Dialogue' in, *Ethics,* (Vol. 101: No. 1, 1994), 44-63, 46

[8] Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 40

[9] Martin Jay, *Reason After Its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory,* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 8

[10] Rainer Forst, *The Right to Justification: Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice* (trans. Jeffrey Flynn), (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 81

[11] Ibid, 49

[12] Ibid, 62

[13] In Forst's own words: "'Constructivism" is understood here as discursive constructivism, which poses the task for autonomous persons of erecting a "normative edifice" upon a morally impartial foundation and of using only those materials and proceeding only according to whose plans that they can accept in a justified way as designers and builders who also represent the subsequent inhabitants' (Forst, 2007, 111)

constructed by human beings through rational procedures.[14] For Immanuel Kant, one such procedure is the application of the Categorical Imperative, 'Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.'[15] Thus, for a Kantian, to respect others as morally autonomous, requires that persons be allowed to interrogate the validity of the norms themselves and decide upon the reasons for actions in their lives.[16] The Kantian character of Forst's reflexive practice is, therefore, a product of making moral autonomy the object of critical diagnosis, as well as the central place he assigns to relational self-reflection in human life.

But Forst and Habermas develop Kant's insight and argue that moral autonomy is not simply a matter of individual achievement. They widen the concept of autonomy to include all those who could be affected by a decision. On this basis, the concept of autonomy is expanded from Kant's conception of *personal* autonomy to *intersubjective* autonomy. Forst follows Habermas's shift from the Kantian monological perspective of the Categorical Imperative to an intersubjective procedure of practical argumentation.[17] As Forst himself describes:

> That human beings must be regarded as moral 'legislators' does not mean that they themselves create the space of the normative in a comprehensive sense. As finite rational beings they do not have any other way to reach an agreement on good moral reasons besides through procedures of reciprocal and general justification.[18]

[14] John Rawls, 'Kant: Moral Constructivism' in, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (ed. Barbara Herman), (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 244

[15] Immanuel Kant, 'Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals' in, *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics* (trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott), (London: Longmans Green and Co, 1954), 1-84, 33

[16] Forst, 2007, 45

[17] McCarthy, 1994, 47

[18] Forst, 2013, 477

Thus, Forst agrees with Habermas that the conditions of moral autonomy can only be analysed – and potentially realised – through acts of communication (discourse),[19] which recognise and treat persons affected by decisions as capable of endorsing or rejecting them as their own.[2020]

This Kantian moral framework shapes Forst's understanding of reflexive practice since it leads him to assert that the critic must attune themselves to how societies hinder relations of justification, which he terms the 'space of reasons'.[21] To study the space of reasons, a critic must assess whether relations of justification uphold the conditions of reciprocity and generality, which Forst lists under 'The Principle of Practical Reason'. 'Reciprocity' is achieved when participants advance their interests in equal measure to the interests of others and therefore respect other individuals as moral persons by acting with reciprocal interest.[22] The second condition, 'generality', guards against 'the exclusion of those possibly affected.'[23] Forst thereby places the space of reasons at the centre of the theorist's analysis and sets their diagnostic task as identifying the foundational violations which make social conditions unjust, namely, those 'legal, political, and social relations that are not reciprocally and generally justifiable.'[24]

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[19] Forst, 2014b, 7

[20] At this point, Forst also signals his commitment to social reflexivity. He argues that discourse is never complete and does not rely on antecedent justification.[20] Instead, claims of justice are *reconstructed* and reconsidered by new persons so as to affirm the moral obligation to justification. The recursive dimension of justification allows Forst to claim that decisions taken in discourse are open to revision. This provides a necessary reflexive safety-check to uphold human autonomy, that enables justification to identify instances of illegitimate justification. The diagnostic work of Forst's Critical Theory contributes to upholding this imaging of social reflexivity. Thus, illegitimate justifications rely on 'reasons' which could not reasonably be accepted (Rainer Forst, 'Introduction: Orders of Justification: On the Relationship Between philosophy, Social Theory, and Criticism' in, *Normativity and Power: Analyzing Social Orders of Justification* (trans. Ciaran Cronin), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-20, 7

[21] Rainer Forst, 'Noumenal Power' in, *Normativity and Power: Analyzing Social Orders of Justification* (trans. Ciaran Cronin), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 37-45, 38

[22] Forst, 2007, 20

[23] Ibid

[24] Ibid, 121

But what separates Frost's project from Habermas's and makes him worthy of study is the location of the normative violation. Forst's rejection of Habermas's view is that the conditions of universalism are not *constitutive* of humans, as opposed to reconstructed from contingent capacities developed by human beings and secured in law.[25] Habermas sees the possibility of transcendence to be immanent to the human capacity for languages since 'everyday communicative practice' shares 'entirely similar structures and presuppositions.'[26] While Habermas believes these argumentative structures are universally 'unconditional' and transcend 'social convention,'[27] he believes the rights that draw upon the normative force of practical reason in communicative action are contingent and secured in law.[28] In contrast to Habermas, Forst, therefore, argues that the normative force of practical reason is anchored in persons rather than the transcendental rules that regulate discourse.

In practical terms, Forst argues that the meta-norm that guides the process of justification will only have transcending force if it comes outside the process itself.[29] As Forst writes, the concept of human needs to serve as its own normative foundation: 'The concept 'human being' must itself acquire a certain independent normative meaning.'[30] This meta-norm is human dignity,[31] expressed in the ahistorical right to

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[25] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (trans. William Rehg), (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 16

[26] Habermas, 1996, 16

[27] Ibid*,* 15

[28] As Forst describes: '[T]he problem with Habermas's conception lies in his attempt to carry out the justification of basic rights – and thus rights to security of person as well as rights to participation – in a manner that is overly immanent to law.' (Forst, 2007, 109)

[29] Similar to Forst, Seyla Benhabib develops Habermas's Kantianism and appeals to a meta norm of discourse *and to* the validity of norms is contingent on their receiving agreement by all concerned parties through the activity of discourse: 'In my interpretation, this meta norm presupposes the principles of *universal moral respect* and *egalitarian reciprocity.'* See: Seyla Benhabib, 'The Uses and Abuses of Kantian Rigorism: On Rainer Forst's Moral and Political Philosophy' in, *Political Theory,* (Vol. 43: No. 6, 2015), 777-92.

[30] Forst, 2013, 457

[31] Throughout his work, Forst reminds us how central Kant's account of autonomy and human dignity to his normative framework. This is clear when he writes: 'Dignity, equal status and normative authority are all concepts that form a unity based on the idea of the moral autonomy of persons with a basic right to justification' (719). See: Rainer Forst, 'The Justification of Human Rights and the Basic Right to Justification: A Reflexive Approach' in, *Ethics,* (Vol. 120: No. 4, 2010), 711-40.

receive justification for claims on persons and the ability to say *no*. Thus, Forst expresses this belief by stating that human dignity is rooted in 'a right to justification', which requires that individuals should not live under conditions that cannot secure rational justification.[32] While Forst doesn't wish to go as far as asserting that 'these rights or principles [serve] as an "external" morality that only needs to be reproduced within a legal order,'[33] he does believe that persons have rights independently of human achievements or societies. Thus, Forst's criticism of Habermas is that the latter's normative foundations are not foundational – that is, Kantian[34] – enough to remain reflexive to violations of human dignity.

That Forst's Kantian belief that humans are 'justificatory beings' determines what he considers to be responsible reflexive practice is clear from Forst's mission statement:

> [T]he constructive and critical task of a theory of justice can be understood as specifying the normative conditions under which the basic structure of society can be called justified.[35]

Forst believes that reflexivity upon a society's relations of justification is the only way to diagnose the roots of social injustices. This is because, at their core, he considers humans and their social practices are engaged in practices of justification.[36] To achieve this, reflexive practice must be guided by a narrow lens that is directed to how social injustices impede an individual's right to say no. Moreover, Forst is clear that he is limiting reflexive practice to instances of unjustifiable relations of discourse. Forst believes responsible reflexive practice need not extend to relations of force, whereby

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[32] Ibid, 711

[33] Forst, 2007, 110-11

[34] See: James Gordon Finlayson, 'A Frankfurter in Königsberg: Prolegomenon to Any Future Non-Metaphysical Kant' in, *Kantian Review,* (Vol. 25: No. 4, 2020), 583-604

[35] Forst, 2007, 116

[36] Forst, 2014a, 188

a reason is imposed on another without their consent,[37] since they are unjustifiable and have no connection to 'procedures of reciprocal and general justification.'[38] Forst offers the example, 'where [one] moves [another] purely by way [of] physical means by handcuffing him or her or carrying him or her away.'[39] Forst considers acts of physical force signal a lack of recognition that persons are 'regarded as moral 'legislators',' [40] and are so clear that they do not require reflexive insight.

The normative force of a critic's diagnosis of unjust societies is anchored by Forst's Kantian framework that believes humans have the capacity to take responsibility for their beliefs and actions by offering reasons to others and have the implicit right to receive justification.[41] A practical example of the right to justification may be found in the Citizen Oversight Boards for Police in the United States. Established as early as 1925 in Los Angeles, Citizen Oversight Boards are avenues through which communities can receive and provide justification for the institutions which support them. As Kevin King has described, Civilian Oversight Boards allow public justification, not simply for the egregious 'bad apple' acts of police brutality, but for the everyday occurrences of police hostility. As he writes:

> Civilians are often further enraged because they do not perceive this exercise of power as legitimate and justified. Thus, when submitting complaints, civilians are not always seeking recourse for the most egregious offenses. Instead, they may simply be searching for an explanation for the officer's actions, an apology, and assurance that illegitimate action will cease.[42]

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[37] Forst, 2014a, 179

[38] Forst, 2013, 477

[39] Forst, 2014a, 179

[40] Forst, 2013, 477

[41] Forst writes: 'That human beings must be regarded as moral 'legislators' does not mean that they themselves create the space of the normative in a comprehensive sense. As finite rational beings they do not have any other way to reach an agreement on good moral reasons besides through procedures of reciprocal and general justification.' (Forst, 2013, 477)

[42] Kevin King, 'Effectively Implementing Civilian Oversight Boards to Ensure Police Accountability and Strengthen Police-Community Relations' in, *Hastings Race and Poverty Law Journal,* (Vol. 12: No. 1, 2015), 91-120, 95

Given Forst's description of force as including 'handcuffing',[43] situating his account of reflexive practice in the context of policing might seem misjudged. But when we engage with King's comment and recognise that police action is not limited to 'the most egregious offences,'[44] it opens a space to situate Forst's theory in the context of policing. Furthermore, Forst's mission for Critical Theory appeals to the basic structure of society which institutions like the police are an essential part. Hence, it is worthy of reflection.

In their ideal formation, Citizen Oversight Boards achieve the aims of Forst's justification by establishing an open dialogue between the community and the police institution. Citizen Oversight Boards seek to ensure power is 'legitimate and justified' by being comprised of non-police citizens who are elected independently of the police and given the power to veto policies and budgets, which they find unjustifiable. Furthermore, when 'searching for an explanation for an officer's actions,' Citizen Oversight Boards ideally would be given the power to pursue investigations into police misconduct without hindrances by, for example, having the power to subpoena evidence in a police misconduct investigation. While the reality of Citizen Oversight Boards is not favourable,[45] I want to be clear that we can see here some of the appeals

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[43] Forst, 2014a, 179

[44] King, 2015, 95

[45] In practice, the recommendations of Citizen Oversight Boards are rarely listened to. For example, when the head of the Minneapolis Citizen Oversight Board, Cynthia Jackson, stood down, claiming the organization 'felt like a farce', describing how, 'On several occasions, the commissioners could not meet to conduct business because the City Council and the mayor failed to appoint new applicants in a timely fashion, allowing membership to fall below the threshold for a quorum.' (See: Andy Mannix, 'Head of Minneapolis Police Oversight Commission Resigns, Renewing Criticism of City's Civilian Review' in, Star Tribune, (March 15, 20122), https://www.startribune.com/head-of-minneapolis-police-oversight-commission-resigns-renewing-criticism-of-citys-civilian-review/600156298/) In the context of George Floyd's murder, this inadequacy had chilling consequences. Practically, the bias is clear from the example of Citizen Oversight Boards. Consider the Minneapolis Citizen Oversight Board, which oversaw the department of Derick Chauven, the murderer of George Floyd. Established in 1990 (See: Human Rights Watch, 'Minneapolis: Civilian Review' in, Shielded From Justice: Police Brutality and Accountability un the United States, https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/police/uspo87.htm#:~:text=The%20Minneapolis%20Civilian%20Police%20Review,public%20against%20the%20MinneapolisPolice%20Department.) "Residents filed

of the right to justification at play. The aim of emancipatory struggles, in Forst's view, is that persons recognise themselves as autonomous in a specifically political sense, whereby they are co-creators of institutions and laws that bind them.[46] Citizen Oversight Boards are means through which the public can – ideally – act with moral autonomy by responding with reciprocity and generality to the operation of one of society's basic institutions. In this regard, Forst is heavily influenced by John Rawls, both methodologically in his appeal to a form of Kantian constructivism, but also in the object of his analysis that the justifiability of a society can be assessed by considering the institutions that make up its basic structure. I evaluate its sufficiency in the context of racialised police violence in the United States. Such an example is suitable, in this respect, since it explores how a basic social institution acts in ways which would – and sometimes do – fail to receive reciprocal and generalisable assent from citizens. As much as Forst concedes that societies are comprised of multiple overlapping justifications, the example of policing illustrates how the justification paradigm appears to underplay the complexity of social relations and misdiagnose the nature of the injustices. Forst's moral framework, therefore, has significant implications for what he deems responsible reflexive practice.

Citizen Oversight Boards could, ideally, serve as vehicles for the right to justification since they serve as forums in which citizens are treated with human dignity in their interaction with a society's basic structure; they are a practical example of how

more than 2,600 misconduct complaints against police officers between 2012 and 2020. But only 12 of those grievances resulted in discipline. The most significant punishment any officer received was a 40-hour suspension.' (See: Paul F. Clark, 'Why Police Unions Are Not Part of the American Labour Movement' in, The Conversation, (August 25, 2020), https://theconversation.com/why-police-unions-are-not-part-of-the-american-labor-movement-142538) With respect to Chauven, he had been "the subject of 26 complaints in his 19 years as a Minneapolis police officer according to Communities United Against Police Brutality (CUAPB).' (See: Abdi Mohamed, 'Civilian Review of Police: Why Has it Failed?' in, Minnesota Spokesman Recorder, (May 12, 2021),https://spokesman-recorder.com/2021/05/12/civilian-review-of-police-why-has-it-failed/).

[46] Forst, 2014b, 108

citizens can be given the opportunity to refuse demands in 'the space of reasons'. It is plausible that a large proportion of a population would find an institution, such as the police, which purports to monitor and protect citizens to be justifiable.[47] By focusing on justice as operating in this way at a higher order than just redistribution, Forst claims to be more committed and loyal to the emancipatory priority of democratic justice.[48]

The methodological implication is that Forst is adamant that the Critical Theorist should be occupied by second-order claims of injustice – the violation of basic human dignity. These occur at a level beneath first-order questions, such as to what goods or opportunities individuals have as a basic right.[49] Forst claims that the emancipatory ambitions of ensuring social relations that uphold human dignity[50] can only be sustained if the 'basic question of justice is not *what you have* but *how you are treated*.'[51] Forst's Critical Theory is, therefore, centred on his effort to defend a moral demand on people to provide a rational justification for their beliefs and actions by offering reasons to others.[52]

Forst's emphasis on justification is an effort to direct the critic to the foundation for emancipatory struggles. So it starts with the dignity of persons which entails that they can demand and offer justifications. The norm of the right to justification is not a metaphysical core of humans[53] – 'these rights are not "naturally" or anthropologically

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[47] This issue, as I explore later in the chapter, is that Forst assumes that the space of reasons is removed from ideology. For someone who upholds meritocratic views in which personal liability responsibility takes home, issues of limited access to public housing or employment following re-entry from incarceration are not unjust, however unfortunate the resultant effects of poverty are. While Forst might say that justifications solve this, since victims wouldn't give assent to the meritocratic position, it does seem to produce a risky condition in which persons could decide on justice claims which are actually politicalised. Ultimately, Forst overplays the autonomy of the space of reasons.

[48] Forst, 2011, 315

[49] As Forst describes in *The Right to Justification*, humans 'must be regarded as beings who have an unconditional right to justification, a basic right on which all other basic rights are founded.' (Forst, 2007, 101)

[50] Forst, 2014b, 108

[51] Ibid, 6

[52] Ibid, 57

[53] It is worth noting that in assessing Forst, it is important to separate his beliefs – the existence of a metaphysical ground for morality – from his methodological proposal for Critical Theory, which is non-metaphysical. While Forst seems to imply that *he* believes there is a moral reality, when he describes justice is 'an

justified rights'[54] – but reconstructed through participation, in so far as justification proceedings must 'comply with the criteria of reciprocity and generality.'[55][56] It is a moral right that emerges in situations of discourses since, as Forst says, moral rights are 'the internal core of every concrete justification.'[57] Forst declares that these 'human rights are of a moral nature and are always claimed as such against that for which no good reasons can be raised.'[58] The reflexive practice Forst deems adequate to this task emerges from this conception of human dignity.

I have introduced Forst's Kantian framework for Critical Theory in this section. I have established that focusing on the right to justification entails a specific account of his project's reflexive responsibilities. In the following three sections, I take Forst's framework to task by outlining three ways in which it promotes irresponsible reflexive practice. In the following section, I present the first symptom of reflexive irresponsibility by questioning the accuracy of Forst's diagnoses. I argue that the often

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unconditional metaphysical ground of morality which we do not create', he concedes that any such insight 'remains an insight of *finite* reason, namely the insight that human beings, as finite beings, are beings who require and are able to offer reasons' (478). Thus, despite Forst's own beliefs, he claims that the right to justification is a standard is rooted in human beings as rational beings, we can accept without sharing a metaphysical justification for why this process if necessary. The right to justification therefore remains committed to the immanence of Critical Theory. (See: Forst, 2013)

54 Forst, 2007, 112

55 Ibid

56 In this respect, I am more open to Forst's claims over the contingency of the right to justification than his other critics. For example, Seyla Benhabib believes Forst fails to see something like human rights as a *contingent achievement* precisely because he considers the right to justification to be a *constitutive* aspect of human beings. Benhabib describes "the right to justification" becomes a supreme principle of practical reason, a lynchpin for all reflection on ethical, social, and political contexts' (See: Benhabib, 2015, 778). But Forst's account of human rights appears to challenge aspects of Benhabib's assessment. He sees them as contingent achievements in two respects. First, by situating human rights within the history of political struggle (decentring a state-led image of human rights). Second, he claims that human rights serve as a form of agency in reflexively assessing less foundational rights claims (See: Forst, 2010, 711). Contra Benhabib's claim, Forst provides genealogies to establish the contingency of human rights: emergence of human rights language in the 17th and 18th century (especially regarding revolutions); and the history of the international human rights regime after the Second World War (See: Forst, 2010, 715). Thus, it is more accurate to suggest that, while Forst acknowledges the historical character of human rights he fails to integrate this contingency into the operation – and reflexivity – of the right to justification. Overall, Forst's treatment of these rights lacks so much scrutiny that they *might as well be* ahistorical.

57 Forst, 2007, 112

58 Forst, 2013, 114

intersectional character of structural injustices suggests that the complexity of structural injustices cannot be captured by the second-order right to justification which frames Forst's Critical Theory. This gives us reason to avoid Forst's Kantian framework for reflexive practice.

## II. SECOND-ORDER PROBLEMS

Forst's account of reflexive practice is connected intimately to his broader framework of justice and the right to justification. Illustrating the irresponsibility of Forst's reflexive practice thus requires one to show how his overall framework cannot accurately diagnose injustices. If his diagnoses are not accurate, they risk further marginalising social injustices and should, therefore, be deemed irresponsible. Exploring Forst's Critical Theory through the lens of structural racism reveals the insufficiency of his justification framework since it shows that Forst's framework cannot accommodate how persons could be granted the right to justification and nevertheless lack meaningful autonomy. Situating Forst's work in the context of the United States, in the disproportionate injustice experienced by Black people in their contact with law enforcement, helps to reveal this flaw in his approach.

Forst's researcher is tasked with diagnosing whether relations of justification could receive reciprocal and general justification as part of a society's basic structure.[59] Reflexively, the critic does not diagnose injustices at the first-order level, identifying such injustices as poverty, health inequality, and inadequate access to housing. Instead, the critic is directed to ask how these social relations affect the autonomy of those who endure them. The implication of this choice for reflexive practice is that the researcher

[59] Forst, 2014b, 8-9

interprets social injustices in terms of their second-order significance concerning justification, a directive warranted due to the assumed universal right persons have to receive justification. Thus, Forst's critic acts with reflexive responsibility when they recognise that first-order injustices, such as targeted policing, ought to be diagnosed as violations of a second-order right to justification that is common to all persons. Since Forst sets the normative benchmark for the theorist at the level of second-order commitments, the direct experience of oppressive social relations is subordinated to what is, for Forst, the more fundamental question of whether they undermine moral autonomy. That is, whether or not such experiences could be accepted by those who endure them. If Forst's assessment is correct, his method allows Critical Theory to avoid relativistic evaluations, enabling the critic to base their diagnoses on an explanation common to different first-order injustices.

Unfortunately, Forst's justification paradigm cannot diagnose accurately. But focusing on second-order issues of justification and making existent or absent relations of justification the clear 'object of analysis', Forst's approach risks misrepresenting the personal experience of injustice and threatens to undermine the accuracy of his diagnosis. It fails to encompass the complexity of structural injustice. It is, therefore, irresponsible to read first-order injustices through the right to justification. Examining the intersectional character of structural injustice, such as structural racism, makes it clear that the right to justification cannot do the diagnostic work which Forst attributes to it, since the framework fails to acknowledge how different first-order experiences interact to create the specificity of injustices. Furthermore, it puts pressure on Forst's view that we can neatly separate instances of 'violence' or 'force' from those related to the right to justification. The consequence of this move is to undermine the accuracy of the critic's diagnoses.

Racism is generally understood as discriminating between persons based on physical or behavioural traits associated with a membership of a group; *structural racism* explores how discrimination affects racial groups *collectively* by virtue of the reproduction of social institutions, norms, and rules interacting together to violate humans along racial categories. While a structural analysis does not overlook or remove the culpability of interpersonal acts of racism, such as the use of dehumanising language to describe and justify Black men who have been killed by law enforcement,[60] it does bring into focus the macro-level of influence through which, as Iris Marion Young describes in her definition of structural injustices, the disadvantages often occur as a result of 'well-intentioned' everyday practices and the 'collective consequences of following those rules.'[61]

In the context of racialised policing, a structural approach to analysing racism is distinct from a 'bad apples' approach, which removes any accountability from policing as an institution. One can see this framing starkly in discussion of the November 2014 murder of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year boy shot in Cleveland, Ohio, by Officer Timothy Loehmann, following a 911 call reporting a juvenile pointing a – 'probably fake' – pistol in a park. A structural analysis fully recognises Loehmann as being responsible for the murder of Rice; however, unlike the 'bad apples' approach, the analysis does not stop at identifying individual wrongdoing, but reveals how these actions occur within a racist structure. Thus, a report investigating the behaviour of the Cleveland Division of Police (CDP), published a month after Rice's death, highlighted how:

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[60] After the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson in 2014, Wilson defended his actions by casting Brown as 'a demon', as having 'the most intense aggressive face', and that he 'felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan' (363). See: Calvin John Smiley and David Fakunle, 'From "Brute" to "Thug": The Demonization and Criminalization of Unarmed Black Male Victims in America' in, *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment,* (Vol. 26: No. 3-4, 2016), 250-366.

[61] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 41

> [M]any African-Americans reported that they believe CDP officers are verbally and physically aggressive toward them because of their race. We also found that, when community members attempt to file complaints about mistreatment at the hands of CDP officers, they are met with barriers and resistance.[62]

The structural injustices engendered by structural racism emerge, therefore, because their everyday reproduction exacerbates and stabilises the multiple relations of advantage and disadvantage, measured by access to certain goods or opportunities, along the lines of gender, race, and income. The uneven outcomes are not reducible to bad luck, but are the predictable consequences of their 'systemic character, its existence as a social practice.'[63] The findings of the report into the CDP, therefore, situates the shooting of Rice, a twelve-year-old carrying a toy pellet gun, which was mistaken for a genuine firearm, in an overall racist structure.

This structural picture of policing also puts pressure on Forst's ability to respond by separating the exact moments of violence or force policing, from their potentially more justifiable role in supporting and protecting a community. Throughout Forst's project, his argument for the right to justification takes place at an abstract level, with few examples that root his claims in concrete political experience. Forst's central claim still remains that a responsible Critical Theory reaches the roots of injustices only by pursuing a line of second-order inquiry focused on relations of justification. An accurate diagnosis is, therefore, one that illuminates how first-order injustices are symptomatic of more deep-lying denial of a person's or group's right to justification.

[62] United States Department of Justice, *Investigation of the Cleveland Division of Police,* (December 2014), 49
[63] Young, 1990*,* 62




The reflexive irresponsibility of Forst's view and why it undermines the accuracy of his project can be illustrated by contrasting his reading of the 2011 'Arab Spring' protests against President Mubarak in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt with the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.[64] Commenting on photographs of the protesters in Tahrir Square, compiled by Karima Khalil, Forst directs his reader's attention to one image of a man holding a sign which says, 'Enough Humiliation'. Forst takes the photograph to be an expression of the second-order nature of the injustice to which he wishes to direct the Critical Theorist's attention:

> The picture helps us place the demand and the politics of human rights in the primary political context in which we have to see them: the struggle for basic forms of respect as legal, political and social agents who do not 'deserve' to be ruled autocratically by a corrupt and oppressive regime. The humiliation that is decried and for which there is a demand that it end is not just a particular form of being denied access to the labour market or to certain social institutions;

[64] Karima Khalil, *Messages From Tahrir: Signs From Egypt's Revolution,* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011), 87

> rather, it is being denied a proper recognition as a legal, political and social authority with certain powers, as someone who 'counts' at least to the extent that it is not others who tell him or her what his or her proper place in society is.[65]

Forst's interpretation of the protest against humiliation expressed by the protester's placard is an effort to show how our analysis of unjust social relations cannot end with a singular first-order injustice. The injustice can only be made sense of by understanding it in light of more profound, second-order violations. In situations such as those he describes in Egypt, Forst argues that claims to financial inequality can only be understood against a broader issue of a lack of democratic participation and the withholding of the right to justification. Thus, responsible reflexive practice, in Forst's view, would engage with these injustices only to the extent that they tell us something about potential violations of the right to justification.

But there are severe difficulties with the transferability of Forst's analyses of Egyptian protests, rooted in claims of lack of justification, to a broader method of Critical Theory. What is potentially attractive about Forst's diagnosis of the protester's placard is his ability to capture democratic deficits under tyranny. It is less clear, however, that this analysis can be extended to social injustices independent of the autocratic direction of tyrannical regimes or that the analysis can even capture the complexity of such regimes. Nor is it clear how the Critical Theory separates *violent* aspects of tyrannical regimes from those that violate the right to justification. Analysis in terms of structural injustices seeks to articulate why people suffer due to the well-intentioned reproduction of social relations while; by contrast, the injustices that Forst points to seem to be traceable to the maleficent actions of an autocrat.[66] Because a frame of structural injustice seeks to understand how the simultaneous operation of

[65] Forst, 2011, 716

[66] See Young's distinction between relations of tyranny and relations of structural injustice (Young, 1990, 41)

certain norms or practices can marginalise and exploit groups without a clear point of origin that could be established as unjustifiable, the claim to a foundational right to justification appears to underplay social complexity. Consequently, Forst risks promoting a reflexively irresponsible method that cannot accurately track the complex nature of structural injustices.




The force of my challenge to Forst's paradigm becomes clear when we consider Joshua Rashaad McFadden's photograph of a protester at a march for Black Lives Matter in Minneapolis, taken in 2020.[67] At first, there is a clear connection between Forst's second-order diagnosis and the foundational claim to dignity, expressed by the slogan 'Black Lives Matter' on the man's face mask. This demand is made in a context where Black lives are systematically shown to be deprived of human dignity when interacting with law enforcement or criminal justice. But the social analysis that

[67] Kyle Almond and Joshua Rashaad McFadden, 'A Black Photographer's View of America's Racial Reckoning' in, *CNN,* (June, 2020)

underpins this sentiment that Black Lives Matter and the movement that carries its name fits less neatly into Forst's paradigm. His analysis is shown to be problematic by the more prominent slogan in the picture, printed on the t-shirts, 'I Can't Breathe', a personal testimony that captures the experience of living under structural injustice.

'I Can't Breathe' came to public attention following the death of Eric Garner (2014) in Staten Island, New York; Garner cried the words eleven times whilst being held in a chokehold by Officer Daniel Pantaleo. The words were repeated by George Floyd in 2020. As the *New York Times* reported, as of 2020:

> [A]t least 70 people have died in law enforcement custody after saying the same words — "I can't breathe." The dead ranged in age from 19 to 65. The majority of them had been stopped or held over nonviolent infractions, 911 calls about suspicious behaviour, or concerns about their mental health. More than half were black.[68]

The theorist Gabriel O. Apata expresses what many activists have already attested to, namely, that the words 'I Can't Breathe' describe the holistic experience of living under structural racism: 'it argues that recent forms of racial injustice are characterised by an ongoing process of systemic and structural suffocation.'[69] This appeal to the metaphor of suffocation is not reducible to a single point of justification. The cry of 'I Can't Breathe' attests, instead, to the complexity of cause, effect, and stabilisation of police brutality in the United States. The words highlight how police brutality cannot be understood outside of the broader network of interacting first-order injustices, such as poverty and marginalisation. These first-order injustices structure interactions with the police so that they result in targeted surveillance, disproportionate interactions,

[68] Mike Baker et al, 'Three Words. 70 Cases. The Tragic History of 'I Can't Breathe' in, *The New York Times,* (June 29, 2020)

[69] Garbiel O. Apata, "'I Can't Breathe": The Suffocating Nature of Racism' in, *Theory, Culture, & Society,* (Vol. 37: No. 7-8, 2020), 241-54, 242

arrests, or, in some acts of violence, fatalities. Thus, responsible and accurate diagnosis of these experiences depends on a structural understanding of their origin.

This conclusion is confirmed by the Chicago police abolition organiser, educator, and curator, Mariame Kaba. She cites the words of the writer Marquise Paino, who describes the everyday experience of racialised policing in Chicago:

> I live in a place where everybody watches you everywhere you go. As a young Black male, everybody watches you. Police pull you over for no reason. They see you, pull up, tell you, "Put your hands on the car." Most of them just be so disrespectful.[70]

Paino's comments on surveillance in Chicago are anchored by 2012 statistics cited by Kaba regarding youth-based arrests in Chicago Public Schools. These show that Black students accounted for 75.5% of school-based arrests, despite comprising only 42% of Chicago Public Schools students.[71] Once again, aspects of racialisation are clear from the fact that, as Arneta Rogers reports, 'black children are 18 times more likely than white children to be sentenced as adults and represent 58% of children sentenced to adult facilities.'[72] This contrasts with Kaba's observations in other parts of the city of Chicago, which she describes in an interview with John Duda:

> I want you think of affluent, white neighbourhoods in the Chicago area like Naperville where there are no cops to be found… anywhere. You actually have to call them to show up. Their kid's schools? No cops, no metal detectors.[73]

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[70] Mariame Kaba, "'I Live In a Place Where Everybody Watches You Everywhere You Go' in, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (ed. Tamara K. Nopper), (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021), 88-92, 88

[71] Mariame Kaba, 'Arresting the Carceral State' in, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (ed. Tamara K. Nopper), (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021), 76-81, 78

[72] Arneta Rogers, 'How Police Brutality Harms Mothers: Linking Police Violence to the Reproductive Justice Movement' in, *Hastings Race and Poverty Law Journal,* (Vol. 12: No.2, 2015), 205-34, 221

[73] Mariame Kaba, 'Toward the Horizon of Abolition' in, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (ed. Tamara K. Nopper), (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021), 93-101, 99

Kaba's words about affluent white neighbourhoods sharply contrast with the words of Paino and underline the multifaceted causes of structural injustices. Reflecting on this contrast reinforces the understanding that accurate diagnoses should be aware of this complexity. Forst's reduction of social injustices to a violated right to justification is incapable of meeting this task.

In this section, I have placed Forst's argument in the context of racialised police violence in the United States, to highlight the political shortcomings of a reflexive practice centred on justification. I have shown that Forst's abstraction away from the experiential rootedness of political claims of racialised police brutality, illustrates how his emphasis on second-order issues leads his proposed reflexive practice to overlook or misinterpret social problems. In the next section, I consider the role of justification within Critical Theory more generally. I argue that it is reflexively irresponsible to make justification the foundation of the critic's method. Therefore, the second risk I address is the validity of Forst's diagnosis that the right to justification secures human autonomy. I present the flaws in Forst's position and suggest an alternative, nevertheless significant, role for justification within transformative politics.

## III. STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE AND JUSTIFICATION

Forst uses his justification framework to explore how social relations undermine moral autonomy by violating people's right to justification. On the surface, this seems to offer much scope to validly interpret structural injustices since there is some connection between the limited capacity to act with human autonomy and accounts of structural injustice. In Young's work on oppression, for example, she describes oppressive social relations – at a most general level – as those which inhibit people's

'ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings.'[74] But more importantly, from the perspective of a justification paradigm, the right to justification seems to help us make sense of injustice in the context of police misconduct and to depict the character of the violation validly.

This conclusion is attractive if we consider sociologist Arneta Roger's definition of police brutality:

> Police brutality, excessive force, or acts of police violence have been described as activities by law enforcement officers that are inconsistent with the official and organization authority, values, and standards of ethical conduct. Others have more succinctly defined police brutality as the use of excessive physical force or verbal assault and psychological intimidation.[75]

Roger's definition of police brutality points to violations of the norms assumed to restrain police conduct. To the victims and citizens, the violation marks police conduct that would not receive reciprocal and general assent in the spaces of reasons. Indeed, on Forst's own distinction between relations of justification and relations of force, police brutality, as all of the violence, is so reprehensible that exceeds the critic's role of identifying the right to justification. For example, to focus on fatalities, around 1000 citizens are killed by the police in the United States each year, and of these, Black men are 2.5 times more likely to be fatally shot than white men,[76] while Black women are 1.4 more likely to be shot.[77] As the Brookings Institute reports, 'Black teenagers are 21 times more likely than White teenagers to be killed by police.' [78] And finally, Black

[74] Young, 1990*,* 40

[75] Rogers, 2015, 221

[76] Lynne Peeples, 'Brutality and Racial Bias: What the Data Says' in, *Nature*, (Vol. 583, July 2020), 22-5, 22

[77] GBD 2019 Police Violence US Subnational Collaborators, 'Fatal Police Violence By Race and State in the USA, 1980-2019: A Network Meta-Regression' in, *The Lancet,* (Vol. 398: 2021), 1239-55, 1239

[78] Rashawn Ray, 'Bad Apples Come From Rotten Trees in Policing' in, *The Brookings Institute,* (May 30, 2020)

people are between 2[79] and 3.5[80] times more likely to be killed by police when unarmed than White people. There is a clear indication, therefore, that the actions of police forces towards Black populations in the United States are systematically more violent and unjustifiable than they are toward White populations. These outcomes would undermine the prospect that such institutions could receive reciprocal and general justification, thereby supporting Forst's framework.

But Forst's commitment to separating a diagnosis of egregious violence from violations of the right to justification, risks disguising the structural dimensions of police brutality. It severs the connection between those aspects of the police as an institution which could receive justification and those which exceed relations of justification through egregious violence. This reflexively irresponsible consequence is supported by considering those officers working within the institution of the police. For example, a 2016 survey 'of nearly 8,000 policemen and women from departments with at least 100 officers' by the Pew Research Centre.[81] When questioned about violent interactions between police and Black people, they found that 'two-thirds [of police officers] said most such encounters are isolated incidents and not signs of broader problems between police and the black community.'[82] Notably, in the Pew study, a majority of black officers (57%)[83] 'said that such incidents were evidence of a broader problem, but only 27% of white officers and 26% of Hispanic officers said so.[84] Thus, even if we exclude instances of egregious police brutality, Forst's justification framework provides one way of analysing the common links between

[79] Peeples, 2020, 22

[80] Ray, 2020

[81] Drew Desilver, Michael Lipka, and Dalia Fahmy, 'Fact Tank: 10 Things We Know About Race and Policing in the U.S' in, *Pew Research Centre,* (June 3 2020), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/03/10-things-we-know-about-race-and-policing-in-the-u-s/

[82] Ibid

[83] Ibid

[84] Ibid

these structural injustices by presenting these institutions in terms of their unjustifiability.

However, what is irresponsible about Forst's justification framework is that such diagnoses tell us little about the nature of injustice under conditions of structural injustice. Structural injustices reveal to us that the contributions of these institutions to injustice can't be isolated from their interconnection to broader social relations. What gives structural injustice its name is the claim that these separate forces, working with one another, produce unjust outcomes such as oppression, observable in the effects of marginalisation. By framing social injustices in terms of justification, we risk taking structural aspects of social injustice out of context in such a way that they can – in isolation – be deemed justifiable social institutions. It is plausible that institutions, such as the police (seen in isolation as a guarantor of security), might be deemed justifiable once taken by themselves, outside of the broader network of oppressive social relations, or once ridden of the egregious violence of some 'bad apples'. For this reason, the normative presuppositions of Forst's method must be considered less valid than he supposes in the context of structural injustices.

Thus, the second reflexive risk raised by Forst is that when the interacting parts of structural injustices are broken down into parts and presented to agents in isolation, many of those parts need not be characterised as 'unjust' and might well be acceptable to agents. To continue with the example of the police, we might consider police funding as one indication of the institution's justifiability and morally acceptability. In the United States, calls for defunding the police peaked in 2020 in the wake of the death of George Floyd. But, as the Pew Institute discovered, these numbers plummeted within eighteen months. Thus, amongst Democratic voters in general, it

fell from 41% to 25%, and among Black people, it fell from 42% to 23%.[85] Thus, even amongst Black communities, there is a noticeable increase in the perceived justifiability of the institution of the police. Many therefore continue to support reformist approaches to the police rather than abolitionist policies associated with defunding or reallocating funding to the police because institutions of security are desirable and a necessary trade-off to secure autonomy.

The reflexive issue, therefore, is whether public justifiability tells us everything we need to know about how violations of autonomy underpin social injustices. Forst's approach does not enable the reflexive practitioner to make the diagnosis that, since funding is used to perpetuate an inherently unjust structure of institutions and social relations, then in reflexive practice, it needs to be identified as unjust. For example, in the case of racialised policing, using justifications as an entry-point to social diagnosis, risks distorting social injustices as discrete problems and thereby failing to reveal those problems as the product of complex relations of socially unequal societies, thus discriminated along axes of wealth, housing, health, race, and gender. Were avenues of justification to be established, the intersectional nature of these injustices would likely have to be pulled apart to try to establish cogent justifications. Forst would no doubt concede that to ask whether the entirety of existing social relations is reciprocally and generally acceptable is too broad a question to offer insight into the injustices committed. The only solution, therefore, would be for the critic to separate structural injustices into discrete relations of justification. But pulling apart the different, interconnecting aspects of structural injustice relating to racialised policing is itself, as I have been arguing, fraught with difficulties.

[85] Ibid

Once we begin to disentangle the interlocking injustices, we start to downplay the structural context in which they are formed. This is not to dismiss efforts to disentangle outright. Doing so may bring clarity to our analyses. But the ambition of projects of justification, such as Forst's, is not principally to achieve clarity as an end in itself, it is to identify and measure forms of social injustice. A project focused on disentangling interacting social relations to evaluate their injustice is in grave danger of losing focus on the cause of injustices that assertions of 'I Can't Breathe' aim to uphold, namely, that the experience of structural injustice is characterised by the interaction and entanglement of multiple social relations (even of some relations which, taken in isolation, may appear justifiable). The necessity of abstracting and isolating 'independent' strands from specific concrete situations of injustice to try to establish forms of reciprocal and general justification (or their absence) should therefore raise concerns over the ability of Forst's proposals to remain reflexively responsible.

Thus, while the examples of racial inequality in police interaction are unjustifiable, framing their fundamental importance in terms of whether they could receive reciprocal and general justification is diagnostically inaccurate. At the level of structural injustice, therefore, the unjustifiability of an institution such as the police cannot be captured adequately as a separable item for justification, and it is reflexively irresponsible to assume otherwise. Analysing the experience of structural racism by attending to the justifiability of political institutions not only risks underplaying the interactions between the institutions, but it also fails to grasp how much of the experience of structural injustice is not egregious or unjustifiable but quotidian and mundane.

Kaba has sought to emphasise this by invoking Saidiya Hartman's writings on violence under slavery in the United States: the mundane and non-exceptional

character of police violence characterises the lived experience of structural injustice. As Kaba describes, there is a 'difficulty [in being able] to name both the spectacle and the quotidian violence Black people in the United States experience daily from the police and the racially deputised.[86] The realities of structural injustice, therefore, ought to lead us to question the validity of Forst's framework.

This is because it is hard to separate the experience of police brutality from other aspects of law enforcement, such as criminal justice. Instead, they are aspects of different interacting parts of structural injustice. The complexity of injustices that relate to police brutality is captured by the direct effects that incarceration has on those given sentences.[87] The incarceration of Black people is 4.8 times that of white people in the United States.[88] As a recent study published by The Sentencing Report explains, 'Black people are incarcerated at a rate of 1240 per 100,000 while white people are incarcerated at a rate of 261 per 100,000.'[89] The effects of incarceration on families and communities are felt in such areas as child-rearing and the number of single parents.[90] For example, Geneva Brown has tracked the cycle of poverty that frames the experience of incarcerated women in the United States. Not only are African-American children '"seven and a half times more likely" to have an incarcerated parent,'[91] but this household instability is often compounded by pre-existing financial pressures. As Brown reports:

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[86] Mariame Kaba, 'Itemizing Atrocity' in, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (ed. Tamara K. Nopper), (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021), 82-7, 86

[87] Geneva Brown, 'The Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Reentry: Challenges for African-American Women' in, *American Constitution Society,* (November, 2010), 1-19, 3

[88] Ashley Nellis, 'The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons', *The Sentencing Project,* (2021), 6

[89] Ibid

[90] See: Arneta Rogers, 2015

[91] Brown, 2010, 8

> Only about 40% of women reported that they were working prior to being incarcerated. Almost 30% of women offenders reported receiving welfare assistance prior to being arrested.[92]

Viewing racial policing in these terms makes its complexity clearer: it is an institution that exacerbates pre-existing systemic inequality between racial groups. The complexity is revealed to be even more labyrinthine when historical aspects of policing are considered.[93] The right to justification is advocated to direct the critic's attention to basic violations of human autonomy. Unfortunately, it seems to induce oversights whereby autonomy continues to be violated even when the right to justification appears to be being upheld. This is due to the effects of structural injustice.

Thinking about structural racism therefore shows the irresponsible reflexive oversights that Forst's approach engenders. Even acts of egregious police brutality, taken as an evaluation of an institution, fail to illustrate how that institution interacts with broader social relations of race and poverty. These aspects are better revealed by targeting the much broader interaction of structures and social relations: policing, incarceration rates, community instability through incarceration and re-entry. Thus, to insist that other claims of justice are derived from the right to justification risks skewing the analysis of situations under investigation. While taken collectively, everything is unjustifiable, aspects of structures may appear justifiable when removed from a structural context.

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[92] Ibid

[93] When police brutality in the United States is discussed, there are important historical issues regarding police, race, and criminality. For work on the construction of criminalisation and race, see: Sarah Haley, No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 17-57. More recently, as Geneva Brown describes, 'The War on Drugs created a tidal wave of legislation meant to socially and legally ostracise drug offenders. […] Poverty permeates nearly a quarter of the African-American population; the same population suffers from poor education high unemployment and, high incarceration rates' (14). See: Brown, 2010.

This line of criticism of Forst doesn't entirely remove the potential value of justification. But it does call into question the possibility that justification could serve as the *foundation* of a Critical Theory which diagnoses social injustices and the validity of injustices are judged. However, I do believe justification does have an important role in the transformative work of political struggle and fostering coalitions between groups. To combat the effects of structural injustice in the form of powerlessness, relations of justification are necessary at the level of social struggles and coalition building, as well as, at the larger scale, of enabling legitimate forms of democracy. When justification is put in a different register, acts of reciprocal and general justification seem valuable in establishing solidarity across victims of injustices. They help to identify forms of broad agreement and appropriate strategies. This is clear from Ruth Wilson Gilmore's work on Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (ROC). She has shown that the victims of racialised policing are not themselves singular nor do they view the injustices along the same lines.[94] The example of coalition building in Mothers ROC makes it worth citing a lengthy quotation from Gilmore's observations:

> Pearl [Daye] ended her introductory testimony to Mothers ROC with an observation about the entire system: "The way I see it there are two laws, one for the Black, and one for the white." Leticia Gonzales, a Chicana whose husband had started a "twenty-five to … without" sentence some months earlier, disagreed. "No. I think there is one law for people of colour, and another law for the white." By this time, everyone was talking. Fracine Arbol proposed another structure: "Poor people and rich people." But poor versus rich failed to explain the state versus O. J. Simpson. Why was the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office spending so much time and money to convict one Black defendant? Therefore, the distinction could not be rich versus poor. At the same time, because virtually all the prisoners anyone in the room knew or could

[94] Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (ROC) is a grassroots organization that tries to get release of wrongly incarcerated persons. It was founded in 1992 in Los Angeles by Barbara Meredith and Francis Arbol, to defend Meredith's son who had been arrested under false charges.

> imagine were people of modest means from working-class families, the money question could not simply be dropped. Anti-black racism seemed to explain a great deal, but could not account for all poverty, powerlessness, and vulnerability before the law. […] Finally, one of the women proposed a solution. There are, as Pearl had said, to laws – one for Black people and one for white people. Given how the prosecutors had started charging more and more Brown people and other poor defendants under the new laws, especially the three strikes acts, then perhaps the explanation could be put this way: you had to be white to be prosecuted under white law, but you do not have to be Black to be prosecuted under Black law. The resolution satisfied that evening's debaters, because it provided a way for the women to recognise one another through the extension of prosecutorial practices without ignoring African Americans' indisputable experience of the new laws' most intensive application.[95]

This extended quotation illustrates the political importance of justification but also its insufficiency as a foundational concept for Critical Theory. Gilmore conveys the value of justification as necessary to coalition-building by activists. Establishing a general account of the 'two track' diagnosis of discrimination in California's law-enforcement clarifies that it requires the shared exchange of experience to agree upon a diagnosis of the injustice that could be generally and reciprocally accepted.

But the conditions of general and reciprocal acceptance also point to the limitations of justification. The participants of ROC accepted that the generality enabled by definition, 'you had to be white to be prosecuted under white law, but you do not have to be Black to be prosecuted under Black law,' could not capture the particular injustices experienced by each participant and their family, against which the coalition sought to defend them. Receiving reciprocal and general justification might not be a sufficient articulation of injustice for some mothers because of the particular way in which injustices of policing are suffered by them.

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[95] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 224-27

The example of ROC reaffirms that a central issue with reciprocal and general justification is that it is a general standard which necessarily abstracts from specific injustices. These injustices are specific insofar as they emerge from social relations which target individuals along axes of oppression. Anchoring critique's diagnosis in justification is, therefore, reflexively irresponsible unless supplemented with other metrics or analyses since reciprocity produces too broad a definition of justice and its absence offers too narrow a view of injustice.

We see that the lack of general and reciprocal justification is a necessarily broad metric used to establish a general perspective of injustice; to diagnose the specific context of injustices, a more detailed and rigorous assessment is required. The problem is that Forst's theory does not insist on reflexive safety checks to deal with the issues that emerge from analysing injustices in complex societies. His method is not sufficient for the task he sets himself. Forst acknowledges the pros and cons of justice as a framework, and he is not oblivious to the complexity of modern societies. A weakness he accepts is the reach of justice: the concept cannot apply to all normative contexts.[96] As he says:

> Life is more varied and complicated than a conception of justice is able to portray. Only by understanding this will we also understand the conflicts in which the priority of justice must be defended.[97]

Forst even outlines the interactions with complex societies. The issue is that if it is not, as Forst contends, just 'life' that is complex, but injustice claims are also understood as complex, then we need – and can ascertain – a theory of justice that is more receptive to these complex claims. The question is once again whether the normative

[96] Forst, 2007, 9
[97] Ibid

foundation of Critical Theory is reducible to the space of reasons in justification. I have argued that it is not. Moreover, once justification is treated as the foundation of Critical Theory, it encourages an irresponsible reflexive practice that lacks the tools to question the framework itself.

In this section, I have argued that to grasp the problem of police brutality, it is diagnostically insufficient to make the institution's reciprocity and generality of justifications the foundation of critical analysis. Since relations of justification, even when entered in good faith, are not exempt from broader injustices, it is not clear that securing the right to justification does achieve – or could ever achieve – the foundational justice Forst attributes to it. Thus, we might question whether the right to justification can achieve justice. Centring Critical Theory around the right to justification produces irresponsible reflexive practice.

I now turn to the most foundational reflexive risk in Forst's belief in 'the autonomous faculty of reasonable persons.'[98] I show that this faith is based on Forst's uncritical approach to reason and his method. I will demonstrate that this raises an issue of 'third-order' reflexivity, whereby the critic's reflexive practice fails to scrutinise the method or tools which guide critique. I argue that without a third-order dimension to reflexive practice, Forst's theory cannot responsibly track the social dynamics under analysis and remain attuned to all the influences affecting the situation of study. Reflexive practice is thereby rendered shallow since Forst's critic is not encouraged to deepen scrutiny to the suitability of justification nor to the liability of justification and reason to being influenced and distorted by power.

[98] Forst, 2013, 472

## IV. THIRD-ORDER REFLEXIVITY

A third-order analysis scrutinises the suitability of a critic's method to the circumstances of study. The term was coined by philosopher Kristie Dotson to describe how researchers might avoid becoming complicit in the social injustices they analyse. As she describes:

> Contributory injustices occur when knowers utilize epistemic resources that are inapt for understanding the potential contributions of particular knowers to our collective knowledge pool and thereby engage in a form of wilful hermeneutic ignorance that refuses to employ more apt epistemic resources for receiving and appropriately responding to those contributions.[99]

Dotson's overriding concern in this rich passage is that the theorist might assume their method to be infallible. She considers such hubris to be reflexively irresponsible since she dismisses the existence of identifying an Archimedean point from which to capture the complexity of social situations. To think otherwise and to assume that epistemic practices are potentially ubiquitous rather than situated is to commit 'hermeneutic ignorance'. Because research is always situated, Dotson believes it requires a feedback loop that draws on the different perspectives of 'our collective knowledge pool', particularly those whose lives are under study. The ability to trace the 'inaptness' of a method can only be ascertained through third-order scrutiny. Dispensing with this methodological self-reflection increases the risk of performing a contributory injustice.

Forst's Critical Theory is underpinned by a lack of third-order reflexivity on reason. This third trait of reflexive irresponsibility within Forst's approach is shown to

[99] Dotson, Kristie, 'A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression' in, *Frontiers,* (Vol. 33: No. 1, 2012), 24-47, 31-2

be the most significant since Forst's second-order commitment to the right to justification depends, on account of reason that entails that rationality can achieve autonomy from dominant social forces. In Sections Two and Three, I argued how Forst's approach to Critical Theory might struggle to capture the experience of structural injustice. I suggested that the complexity of experiences was reduced to a foundational diagnosis that a person's right to justification had been violated. A lack of third-order reflexivity on the influence of social forces on reason, therefore, illuminates how Forst's overall account of reflexive practice might be deemed irresponsible at its root.

This conclusion becomes clear by considering Forst's account of reason and its relation to power in more detail. As stated in Section One, Forst appeals to a Kantian account of reason that presents reason as 'self-sufficient and unpolluted.'[100] Forst explains that his commitment to the autonomy of reason from social forces is sustained by drawing a strict distinction between his own Kantian and so-called Left-Hegelian understandings of reason. According to the Left-Hegelians, activities of reason are just one way in which persons engage in social practices. This approach assumes a certain degree of (existent or potential) unity between persons and the social. Therefore, the Left-Hegelian assumes that reason is not autonomous, not independent of other social practices, but shaped by them, as we saw in Horkheimer's Marxian account of reason in Chapter One.[101] Responsible reflexive practice for the Left-Hegelian thereby requires the critic to subject the presuppositions of reason to scrutiny and sees reason as a social practice.[102]

[100] Jay, 2016, 8
[101] Forst, 2011, 311
[102] Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro), (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 19

The Kantian, Forst writes, believes the Left-Hegelian account of reason is too situated within the social-historical context; its claims result from too great an anxiety to avoid the Hegelian attempt to ground the moral foundations of justice on ideas of the good life. Forst doesn't mean to imply that reason is ahistorical, since he still considers reason to be historically effective and thus requires recursive justification.[103] But suppose Critical Theory is to use reason to make context-transcending claims. In that case, Forst believes it is insufficient to pursue a Left-Hegelian route, since according to that account, reason is not autonomous.

This approach has important implications for an understanding of power and the situated nature of theorising. Forst conceives of power as an intersubjective relation that rests upon one person's recognition of a reason to tailor their conduct in accordance with another's intention.[104] While Forst believes that the space of reasons always takes place within situations of power,[105] he claims that power relations are neither good nor bad in and of themselves, but depend on the quality of the justifications provided. This means that to test whether power relations are justified, we need to ascertain whether the relations are cordial enough to allow the space of reasons to continue.[106]

Forst's account of power is thereby described as *noumenal* as it exhibits a cognitivist character since the space in which it operates is the realm of rational justification. Forst insists that power rests on 'recognized, accepted justifications' of varying quality[107]: they can be 'critical', and, therefore the product of informed reflection; they can (to a limited degree) be 'forced', as are the weaker parties to a

[103] Forst, 2014b, 7
[104] Ibid, 9
[105] Forst, 2017, 51
[106] Forst, 2014b, 9
[107] Forst, 2017, 41

compromise or coalition; or they can be 'blindly accepted.'[108] Forst believes that power is always internal to reason and observes that:

> Having power means being able to use, influence, determine, occupy, or even close off the space of reasons and justifications of other subjects.[109]

Since power is never external to reason, Forst is confident that power relations could not act as a Trojan horse and destabilise the possibility of legitimate justification within the space of reasons.

Equating responsible reflexive practice with the task of uncovering unjustifiable social and political procedures closes off a third-order reflexive lens. Forst does not allow space for the critic to question the validity of the process by which social and political procedures are judged to be justifiable or unjustifiable. Reflexive practice attends only to the relations *within* the space of reasons and is limited to uncovering 'false' (ideological) justifications of asymmetrical social relations.[110] Meanwhile, Forst can maintain this position only by defining power relations that violate the right to justification so that they are also internal to the space of reasons. Forst can only secure the autonomy of the space of reasons by – effectively – securing it from any social baggage.[111] Amy Allen considers that Forst pays too little attention to what she describes as the 'scandal of reason': reason has the 'capacity *both* to stabilize and legitimate *and* to destabilize and delegitimate relations of domination and subordination.'[112] This requires a limited account of reflexive practice.

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[108] Ibid

[109] Forst, 2014b, 9

[110] Ibid, 7-8

[111] Lois McNay, 'The Limits of Justification: Critique, Disclosure and Reflexivity' in, *European Journal of Political Theory,* (Vol. 19: No. 1, 2020), 26-46, 28

[112] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), 72

Through his account of power, Forst would, therefore, have us believe that social inequalities persist based on the acceptance of illegitimate reasons and justifications. Lois McNay claims that Forst fails to establish a connection between the role of justification as a transcendental principle and justification as a tool for identifying social injustices through reflexivity because its foundations are too abstract and misrepresent the material constitution of lived experience. As an instance of this, McNay reveals that patriarchal power relations *do* step outside the space of reasons. McNay explains this when she writes that noumenal power seems less capable of explaining why 'hegemonic gender norms would not cease to have an influence on women if they chose not to recognise the patriarchal arguments conventionally used to justify them.'[113] McNay is pointing to the inadequacy of a method of critique that reduces relations of oppression to cognitive issues.

The reflexive irresponsibility of Forst's position is illuminated in his discussion of patriarchy:

> Within a patriarchal structure… women may conform to patriarchal rules even where the patriarch leaves things implicit or is absent, or no longer tries to dominate. That means that the noumenal power structure that supports social power relations is still in place, with the result that certain order of action is upheld.[114]

Here, patriarchal justification has an ideological effect. But Forst fails to see that this influence is external to the space of reasons. For example, gender pay gaps will not disappear with new justifications since they are the product of longstanding material problems. Thus, despite Forst's defensive manoeuvres, a gap has been opened in his

[113] Ibid, 9
[114] Forst, 2017, 45

account of power – and by Forst – whereby specific experiences cannot be accounted for by a basic appeal to the noumenal.

Forst's claim for the autonomy of reason is reflexively irresponsible at the third-order level in that he does not encourage the critic to go deep enough with their reflexive gaze and fails to fully recognise that the giving and receiving of justificatory reasons by the oppressed is itself subject to all kinds of structural injustices. In the context of structural racism, this broader view of materiality is supported by linguist Ruth Wodak's work on discrimination through practices of inclusion and exclusion in discourse: 'we need to approach the processes of 'inclusion/exclusion' by carefully considering issues of power, in defining access *to* discourses and power *in* discourses.'[115] Similar concerns are expressed by Allen, who fears that the capacities favoured by procedural justification are those 'most comfortably practised by the member of elite groups.'[116]

Wodak is clear that the criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of groups are not themselves fixed criteria but rooted in the political context in which the interaction is taking place. As such, the conditions for participation 'changes due to different criteria of how insiders and outsiders are defined in each instance.'[117] As Wodak says:

> [E]xclusion means *deprivation of access* through means of explicit or symbolic power… implemented by the social elites: access to participation, citizenship, the media, information, language learning, power positions, important organizations, jobs, housing, education and so on. Powerful elites frequently justify such exclusion in various ways; reference is made to status, belonging, ethnicity or gender, explicitly or implicitly, by discursively creating ever-new topologies.[118]

[115] Ruth Wodak, "Us' and 'Them': Inclusion and Exclusion – Discrimination via Discourse' in, *Identity, Belonging and Migration* (eds. Gerad Delanty, Ruth Wodak, and Paul Jones), (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 54-77, 55

[116] Allen, 2015, 152-3

[117] Wodak, 2008, 56

[118] Ibid, 59

Forst ought to place stricter reflexive checks in place. As we have seen, Forst's autonomous account of reason depends on the view that standards of good reasoning and acceptability that govern the space of reasons are autonomous. In contrast, in the light of the above studies, they are shot through with historical forms of inequality and domination.

This has troubling consequences for the reflexivity of Forst's programme since our aptitude for public justification is less a guaranteed consequence of being 'rational animals' and more a product of initiation into and training in the skills of public discourse (to cover writing, emails, texting etc.). Subtler forms of influence, like the weight of a person's credibility, are not factored into Forst's account. Relations of credibility are not internal to the space of reasons but emerge as an effect of material social practices that are external to justification practices. For example, inequalities outside the effect of these material power relations have given rise to credibility deficits rather than the dynamics being internal to reason. Allen has rightly asserted that the ability to identify a good argument and the good fortune to be perceived by other participants as a credible knower who could contribute good reasons are contingent features of one's circumstances rather than universal givens.[119] The charge of reflexive irresponsibility is thus established because Forst gives little or no scrutiny of the metric or tools of his theory. This indicates irresponsibility in Forst's reflexive engagement with reason. The question of justification, as Allen argues, can no longer be regarded as foundational. Instead, it must be recognised that material power relations operate at a level *beneath* the radar of reason.[120] In this way, the space of reasons can itself be undermined. That Forst's methodology is subject to many questions and challenges

[119] Allen, 2015, 151
[120] Ibid, 9

strongly confirms that responsible reflexive practice must engage in third-order critique.

A more reflexively responsible account of reason would acknowledge the situated character of reason as a social practice, one which leans on the Left-Hegelian tradition. By contrast, Forst can only maintain a noumenal account of power due to an idiosyncratic understanding of 'materiality' within reason.[121] Materiality within reason is leverage which we bring to motivate others to accept, or at least obey, our terms. In *Normativity and Power* (2017), Forst acknowledges the presence of materiality in power relations but remains steadfast to his conviction that power is noumenal to 'the very core.'[122] Materiality is just one of the 'effects of power[…] based on the recognition of a reason.'[123] Forst makes a more straightforward use of 'materiality' and conceives it through *hard* or *realist* conceptions of power such that materiality refers to the operation of power through physical means, 'be it money or weapons.'[124] On Forst's account, our rational activities are not liable to these forces. Rational activities form a membrane against them. This allows him to claim justification as the root injustice because, despite the injustices of societies, there is always the possibility of achieving that. Thus, Forst's position here is reflexively irresponsible and hard to sustain.

[121] Forst approaches McNay's concern through his analysis of Michel Foucault's theory of discursive power. His reconstruction argues that Foucault's theory of power is also cognitive at its core and that even Foucault's account of the discipline of the body is shown to operate *through* pre-existing cognitive claims. Forst can therefore be said to situate McNay's challenge on his own noumenal footing. But even this recapitulation by Forst acknowledging the presence of materiality in power relations is insufficient. (Forst, 2017, 6)

[122] Forst, 2017, 40

[123] Ibid, 41

[124] Ibid, 43

# V. CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have argued that Forst's approach to Critical Theory promotes a reflexively irresponsible method of diagnosis. The root cause, as I laid in Section Four, is an uncritical engagement with reason, since it is Forst's commitment to an autonomous account of reason that enables him to wholeheartedly endorse the right to justification. Forst's failure to scrutinise his project at a third-order level thereby infects the entirety of his project, which blinds itself to the reality that the space of reasons is not immune from the influence of power relations. Indeed, Forst's conviction in the autonomy of reason leads him to underplay the complexity of structural injustice. A more reflexively responsible route acknowledges the general insight of the Left-Hegelian tradition laid out in Section Four, that understands reason as a social practice. Despite this conclusion, I demonstrate in the following chapter how a Left-Hegelian account does not, by itself, secure responsible reflexive practice. By examining the work of Rahel Jaeggi, I show that a Left-Hegelian account of reflexive practice does not guarantee that the situated nature of theorizing will be totally accounted for.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *REFLEXIVITY AND INTERPRETATION*

# Chapter Three

## Reflexivity and Interpretation

In the previous Chapter, I argued that a Kantian approach to Critical Theory, represented by Rained Forst, was reflexively irresponsible. Forst's noumenal account of reason was so abstract that a critic who followed his method would risk misrepresenting the situated nature of reason. In this chapter, I explore how Critical Theorists have tried to correct the reflexive weaknesses of the Kantian trend, which saw reason as an activity removed from social relations. By contrast, the 'Left-Hegelian' strain of Critical Theory considered in this chapter understands reason as a social practice. The approach is worthy of consideration since its account of reason is the most widely shared understanding of situated rationality in contemporary Critical Theory. However, I illustrate that a commitment to the Left-Hegelian position is not without its reflexive risks. By considering Rahel Jaeggi's vision for a Critical Theory of 'forms of life' as an example of a Left-Hegelian account of Critical Theory, I show that when the socialisation of the critic who performs analysis is not factored into our reflexive practice, even a materialist account of reason is liable to overlook the effects of marginalisation in its analysis, and thereby produce irresponsible forms of critique.

In Section One, I introduce Jaeggi's Critical Theory as a development of the Left-Hegelian tradition in Critical Theory. Situating Jaeggi's work in the broader context of the Frankfurt School allows us to appreciate why her recent contributions to Critical Theory, and their implications on the understanding of reflexive practice, are worthy of attention. Jaeggi's vision for Critical Theory involves the critic studying the networks through which social practices coordinate with one another to enable persons and communities to live shared and stable lives. In Jaeggi's view, these forms

of life embody 'solutions' to the problems that have confronted societies; when faced with the issue of how best to raise children, for example, many promote small units led by a monogamous couple as the solution. The critic then identifies when the solutions offered by social practices break down and cause forms of life to become *problematic*.[1]

Jaeggi's work is formal and lacks concrete examples. Rather than dismiss her work on these grounds, I try to read specific concrete crises as forms of life and frame my discussion of forms of life against the problems raised by marginalisation against Black communities in the United States. To this end, in Section Two I apply Jaeggi's approach to the example of the 2014 water crisis in the city of Flint, Michigan in the US. Because the problems underlying the breakdown of social practices are not always obvious, Jaeggi's account of diagnosis emphasises the role of *interpretation*, which she describes as a highly reflexive process. In Section Two I will try to illustrate the role of interpretation in approaching the Flint crisis. In Section Three, I then outline the theoretical basis of Jaeggi's account of reflexive practice, to which interpretation is key, by drawing upon her account of the 'transactional self' presented in her book, *Alienation* (2014).

Focusing on these problems in Jaeggi's work enables me to illustrate the weaknesses of Jaeggi's account by highlighting how it would fail to diagnose structural racism. I outline the first weakness in Section Four and argue that Jaeggi's account of problem diagnosis promotes 'epistemic laziness'. To address this reflexive weakness, Jaeggi should provide a more detailed social-epistemic picture of the process of interpretation that explains how persons from different social locations could diagnose problems differently and remain aware of the specific biases that shape each of their

[1] Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life* (trans. Ciaran Cronin), (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 141

interpretations. In Section Five, I suggest this would require her to acknowledge that being reflexive to situated knowledge entails a responsibility to be self-aware of one's standpoint.

In the final section of this chapter, I suggest a more damaging concern with Jaeggi's approach to reflexive practice. I argue that Jaeggi's commitment to interpreting social crises as being, at root, second-order problems, is unable to track the intersectional character of social breakdowns accurately. By returning to the water crisis in Flint and reconstructing the intersectional problems that defined it, I demonstrate that Jaeggi's method underplays the significance of first-order problems in her interpretation of social crises. This undermines the responsibleness of her reflexive practice, since it is shown to be too cognitive and inhibits the theorist's ability to diagnose problems in forms of life. The overall picture we get from Jaeggi's Critical Theory is an insufficient account of reflexive practice. While her work engages with a more responsible reflexive practice than a Kantian approach, like Forst's, her method prioritises abstract second-order values that distract the critic from the lived experience of social injustices.

## I. FORMS OF LIFE

Rahel Jaeggi believes Critical Theory contributes to social change by examining why societies undergo regression and descend into crises. She believes societies enter crises when they can no longer ensure the '*cultural and social reproduction of social life*' (her emphasis).[2] She explains that crises occur due to a regression in the values that

[2] Ibid, 3

underpin a society's 'form of life'.[3] The critic's role is to identify the breakdown of these values and offer insight into their possible transformation.[4] The outcome is a Left-Hegelian approach to Critical Theory that advocates a significant change in direction to the reflexive practice promoted by Rainer Forst, which I explored in the previous chapter.

But like Forst, Jaeggi's contribution to Critical Theory is clarified by viewing her in relation to Jürgen Habermas. Since Habermas, large portions of Critical Theory have followed the liberal tradition of political theory that restricts critique to the moral evaluation of society, focused on claims of justice. Many find this approach attractive since the supposed universality of moral claims is assumed to afford context-transcending validity to the critic's diagnoses, making their findings more responsible as a result. These moral claims stand in contrast to the plurality of ethical claims that relate to a person's perception of 'the good life'. As ethical judgements lack the transmissibility of moral investigations, theorists like Habermas and Forst consider that a preoccupation with ethical claims deprives the theorist of a foothold from which to judge the injustice of situations of study. For Critical Theory to be diagnostically accurate and, thus, reflexively responsible, Habermas and Forst each believe the theorist must establish solid normative foundations supported by moral rather than ethical claims.

Jaeggi positions her Critical Theory in contrast to this view, which she dismisses as a 'liberal avoidance strategy.'[5] The preoccupation with establishing firm normative foundations, in Jaeggi's estimation, ultimately undercuts the accuracy of Critical Theory's diagnoses because it ignores how the ethical decisions persons make

[3] Rahel Jaeggi, 'Rethinking Ideology' in, *New Waves in Political Philosophy* (eds. Christopher Zurn and Boujdewijn de Bruijn), (London: Palgrave, 2009), 63-86, 75

[4] Jaeggi, 2018, 26-7

[5] Ibid, 16

often carry the mark of broader social influences.[6] As she observes, 'ethical concerns are also produced behind the backs of individuals.'[7] By setting too narrow a lens for diagnosis,[8] Jaeggi, therefore, believes the 'liberal avoidance strategy' cannot track the complex interconnectedness of our social lives and subsequently impedes the theorist's ability to contribute to social change.

Thus, where Forst was shown to follow Habermas, Jaeggi is influenced by Habermas's Frankfurt School predecessors, notably Theodor W. Adorno. As Jaeggi comments in her assessment of Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1951), Adorno is willing to break the rigid distinction between ethical-moral critique to show that people's ethical choices regarding how they live their lives can be judged as wrong.[9] This is because Adorno believes 'the objective powers' of capitalism, which 'determine individual existence,' extend to the 'most hidden recesses' of our societies, down to shaping such things as the act of gift-giving or the attitude with which one slams a door.[10] Thus, in order 'to know the truth about life,'[11] Adorno, and, by extension Jaeggi, advocates an account of reflexive practice that is radically different to the method promoted by Forst. Rather than search for the moral violations associated with Kantian philosophy, Jaeggi directs the critic's gaze to include the ethical dimension concretely embedded in lifeworlds. She advocates a critique of 'forms of life' to achieve this.

Forms of life comprise of individual social practices coordinating with one another to make 'an interdependent *functional nexus.*'[12] Generally, a *practice* follows repeatable and recognisable rules that determine its success and guide its performance.

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[6] Ibid, 10
[7] Ibid, 16
[8] Ibid, 14
[9] Rahel Jaeggi, "'No Individual Can Resist": *Minima Moralia* as Critique of Forms of Life' in, *Constellations,* (Vol. 12: No. 1, 2005), 65-82, 65
[10] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (trans. E. F. N. Jephcott), (London: Verso, 2005), 15
[11] Ibid
[12]' Jaeggi, 2018, 61

A 'social' practice is no different and applies this logic to our repeatable social interactions, with Jaeggi's examples ranging from the mundanities of queuing before a shop's check-out, to the responsibilities of child-rearing, up to the large-scale influence of economic policy.[13] Forms of life are thereby presented as the networks through which social practices coordinate, enabling persons and communities to live shared and stable lives. Jaeggi captures their complexity when describing the interdependence of social practices:

> The practice of shopping… is possible only in market societies, standing in line at the check-out is possible only where money and cash registers exist, and making money transfers requires banks.[14]

The advantage of Jaeggi's strategy is that her focus on the interaction of specific social practices places the critic in a strong position to identify the social practices that contribute to social injustices and so meet the transformative ambitions of a Critical Theory.

But Jaeggi believes the diagnostic value of analysing the '*forms* in which life is lived' (her emphasis)[15] is not limited to helping the critic recognise the breadth of capitalism's influence. She also considers that examining forms of life provides a framework for normatively evaluating societies without relying on narrow claims of justice.[16] Jaeggi is confident that forms of life afford this normative insight into societies because she considers human social practices to be the sources of our normative values and rational claims.[17] Jaeggi follows a broader pragmatist turn in Critical Theory and takes the view that our social values are formed and stabilised *within*

[13] Jaeggi, 2018, 61
[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid, 3
[16] Ibid, 73
[17] Rahel Jaeggi and Nancy Fraser, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 141

our social practices, arguing that the standards of our social values derive from these '*inherent* normative claims' of social practices.[18] Consider the social practice of monogamy and the Hegelian bourgeois family unit. At a second-order level of problem-solving, the social practice of monogamy might be held up as a solution to the problem of the disintegration of the nuclear (heterosexual) family from *external* obstacles, such as the allure of a fresh-faced milkman.

Jaeggi, therefore, dismisses the sort of Kantian picture of normativity and rationality that would tie our normative judgements to a foundation *independent* of our social practices, such as Forst's right to justification.[19] As Jaeggi states, 'there is no such thing as a dogmatic, presuppositionless beginning, but only a starting point within an already existing constellation.'[20] Instead, she believes that our claims to normativity and rationality are socially situated and emerge from 'the *inherent* normative claims' of our human social practices.[21]

Rather than flirt with normative relativism, however, Jaeggi argues that our situated values contain an immanent metric that allows us to judge their normativity and rationality through social practices' ability to solve coordination problems. This move relies on a Left-Hegelian account of reason. According to the Left-Hegelians, activities of reason are just one way in which persons engage in social practices. Jaeggi's account is heavily influenced by the American pragmatist tradition, especially the work of John Dewey. Dewey's account of knowledge is rooted in problem-solving and sees knowledge as a practical activity rather than an effort to uncover invariant truths. As Eddie J. Glaude argues, for Dewey, rather than a 'private mental activity', rationality is a social artefact that reflects collective social levels of problem-solving; thus

[18] Jaeggi, 2018, 155
[19] Jaeggi and Fraser, 2018, 140
[20] Jaeggi, 2018, 193
[21] Ibid, 155

'knowledge is the fruit of our attempts to resolve problematic situations and is understood in the context of communal inquiry.'[22]

Similarly, Jaeggi defends the ontological significance of life forms because she considers them constituted by problem-solving. She argues that the social practices which make up forms of life are 'strategies for solving problems confronting humanity.'[23] In this spirit, the problem-solving capacity of forms of life represents the practical embodiment of the social reflexivity standard, the level of collective learning – or rationality. As Jaeggi asserts, '[o]nly *those* practices are rational that represents an appropriate response to a described problem.'[24] What is 'rational', in Jaeggi's view, is the underlying rule that guides social practices to solve future problems. Thus, when social practices solve problems, they are said to 'function well', they ensure the 'cultural and social reproduction of social life.'[25] In short, they display an adequate level of social reflexivity.[26] By contrast, when forms of life fail, they exhibit an internal deficit and the norms that guide a social practice can no longer solve problems.[27] The form of life becomes characterised by '(deficient) problem-solving.'[28] In this regard, the form of life 'lead[s] to regressive reaction formations'[29] that produce a 'block' in collective learning; its underpinning norms, therefore, require transformation.[30]

By advocating a problem-solving process, Jaeggi articulates a soft notion of progress, expressed through the idea of 'learning' that follows a cumulative history of problem-solutions. Through each new problem solved, forms of life become more

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[22] Eddie S. Glaude Jr, *In A Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America,* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 24

[23] Jaeggi, 2018, 171

[24] Ibid, 236

[25] Ibid, 3

[26] In conversation, Jaeggi has dispensed with the controversial idea of a *learning process;* she favours the term of a *process of experimental problem-solving*. It remains unclear whether this change in terms disarms what is actually problematic with *learning*, namely, her appeal to a concept of progress.

[27] Jaeggi, 2018, 165

[28] Ibid, 231

[29] Ibid

[30] Ibid, 315

'rational' than before because, according to Jaeggi, the form of life has learnt from past mistakes and found solutions to its problems.[31] When learning is progressive, as Bernard E. Harcourt describes, we can 'solve *more* of the problems that arise or may arise' than before.[32] This is clear in Jaeggi's description:

> But if social blockages to learning involve systematic rather than contingent blockages of access to the foundations of knowledge, which are open to social reflection and can be implemented in learning processes, then progress in learning, which should be understood, as a process of enrichment and differentiation, always requires in addition the removal of these systemic causes.[33]

But this conception is non-foundational, and there is no fixed teleology to which progress is directed. Instead, the trajectory is open-ended and contingent on the problems with which forms of life are confronted. In this respect, Jaeggi's account of social learning lies somewhere between G. W. F. Hegel's account of learning through contradiction (determinate negation),[34] and Dewey's notion of learning through problems since change is driven by negative experience.[35] The new solution appears and emerges *through* the old solution and is deemed successful insofar as it corrects the weaknesses of its predecessors. What is more, Jaeggi sets the task of the critic as contributing to a process of identifying *new* norms if necessary. As she describes, critique 'aims not to restore an existing order or to reinstate valid norms and ideals as to transform them.'[36] Thus, Jaeggi's understanding of critique aims to correct the

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[31] Roberto Frega, 'Pragmatizing Critical Theory's Province' in, *Dewey Studies,* (Vol. 1: No. 2, 2017), 4-47, 33

[32] Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020), 184

[33] Jaeggi, 2018, 285

[34] Ibid, 194

[35] Frederick Neuhouser, 'The Normativity of Forms of Life' in, *From Alienation to Forms of Life: The Critical Theory of Rahel Jaeggi* (eds. Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta), (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 59-75, 59

[36] Jaeggi, 2018, 203

inadequacy of the failed and existing norm.[37] It is due to the ontological significance of forms of life that Jaeggi, therefore, believes that their examination affords the critic the opportunity to analyse the 'most hidden recesses' of our societies.

What is of interest to Jaeggi in the breakdowns of forms of life is less the (first-order) problem of social reproduction rather than what moments of social disintegration disclose to us, namely, an underlying (second-order) breakdown in the norms that underpin our forms of life.[38] Jaeggi's critic focuses on the second-order to grasp the 'necessary contradiction' within the social practice. The critic's task is to judge forms of life immanently – 'on its own terms'[39] – something that can only be achieved by evaluating the success of second-order values and whether social practices successfully enact that norm. Thus, this problem-solving character of social practices serves as the yardstick against which she believes the Critical Theorist should judge whether or not a social practice has become problematic. Then the critic measures this through the notion of regression. The critic must, therefore, become attuned to those first-order coordination problems which reveal something of greater ontological significance, namely, how these coordination problems expose the 'hidden normativity' which underpins the practices themselves.[40]

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[37] Ibid, 204

[38] Returning the example of the Hegelian bourgeois family unit, the family unit is deemed necessary because it provides a solution to the problem of social coordination, since it is believed to educate its members about social norms, as Lois McNay describes, by 'inculcating dispositions to responsibility, role obligation, tolerance and other essential democratic virtues.' At the normative level, then, forms of life become problematic when they can no longer solve problems and 'measure up to a level of aspiration' set by their internal validity claims and it is against these claims the critic judges them. Thus, if it were seen that the practice of monogamy no longer protected against first-order problems or provided ethical development, this form of life might be judged to be – immanently – dysfunctional. See: Lois McNay, 'Social Freedom and Progress in the Family: Reflections on Care, Gender and Inequality' in, *Critical Horizons,* (Vol. 16: No. 2: 2015), 170-86, 175; Jaeggi, 2018, 164

[39] James Gordon Finlayson, 'Hegel, Adorno and the Origins of Immanent Critique' in, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, (Vol. 22: No. 6, 2014), 1142-66, 1143-4

[40] Harcourt, 2020, 170

For example, Jaeggi describes poverty from a normative-functional perspective and thus concludes that poverty is wrong *and* dysfunctional.[41] For Jaeggi, poverty poses a functional (first-order) problem to individual reproduction and social disintegration. More significantly, poverty also presents a normative (second-order) problem in which a form of life's underpinning norm has been violated,[42] since, against the norms of capitalist civil society, poverty *should not exist*. By its self-understanding, civil society is guided, as Jaeggi describes, by 'the promise of achieving a position within society through work in which one can provide for one's livelihood and thereby enjoy recognition.'[43] Unfortunately, like the rest of Jaeggi's work, this example is incredibly abstract. To assess her account of reflexive practice, more flesh must be added to her account. I do this by considering the 2014-16 water crisis in Flint, Michigan (United States), trying to approach it using Jaeggi's 'forms of life' template.

It is certainly not the case that Jaeggi's project does contain examples. However, I believe these are the wrong kind of examples in that they fail to add clarity to her theoretical project of forwarding a new approach to Critical Theory and upholding the political commitments of a Critical Theory that claims to be engaged in and support political struggles (rather than abstract away from them).

From the perspective of theoretical clarification, I find her choice of examples to be confusing. Her project for forms of life is an effort to explain social ontology and, as part of this, to offer an explanation of the sources of our normative values. Given the ambitions of this endeavour, one would expect – or, at the very least, wish for – an attempt to map her theoretical framework onto actual social events or social crises. Instead, Jaeggi's abstract and dense philosophical portrait of forms of life is

[41] Jaeggi and Fraser, 2018, 142
[42] Jaeggi, 2018, 162
[43] Ibid

explained by brief allusions to shopping, an appeal to the Hegelian account of the nuclear family, and by a broad gesture to the inconsistencies between ideas of freedom to be found in exchange relations in capitalism and the experience of a lack of freedom found in labour contracts. Jaeggi's decision to proceed with these examples is confusing because it leaves her work open to calls for further clarification of how forms of life can be understand in particular contexts – especially as her project makes little to no mention of the different groups that participate in forms of life, or whether her framework applies only to Western societies or can be taken as a universal account of social ontology.

The slim and abstract examples that support Jaeggi's impressive theoretical work are also confusing from the perspective of the political commitments of a Critical Theory. Critical Theories are transformative theories in the sense that the theorist understands their social analyses as contributing to social struggles against oppression. By keeping her examples abstract and removed from any discernible social context, Jaeggi is in danger of reducing the political application of her theory. Her robust account of immanent critique details the transformative orientation taken by the Critical Theorist; unfortunately, her examples of breakdowns of forms of life are so removed from any real 'crises' that, as readers, we are not shown how a critique of forms of life applies to contemporary social crises, nor how such analyses engage with and support social struggles relating to those crises.

In this section, I have outlined the core of Jaeggi's approach to Critical Theory as being characterised by a pragmatist take on Left-Hegelianism. I have highlighted how her social ontology of forms of life as problem-solving mechanisms entails a form of reflexive practice that is wide in scope and focused on second-order problems. Thus, where Forst followed Habermas's Kantian turn in Critical Theory, which focused on the capacity of a transcendental account of rationality to ground universal

norms, Jaeggi supposes that norms are immanent in social practices. As she puts it, a 'critic of ideology does not criticise the ideal of freedom and equality themselves, but their different realisations.'[44]

## II. FLINT WATER CRISIS

The water crisis in Flint began in April 2014, when the city's water supply was transferred from Lake Huron, in Detroit, to the Flint River, as an interim measure before a new pipeline was completed.[45] The decision was taken by a newly installed Emergency Financial Manager,[46] who took over executive powers of city management, removing the mayor and city councillors. As part of an ongoing effort to deal with the Flint local government's $25 million deficit,[47] the switch from Huron was estimated to save $18 million over three years. Instead, the outcome of the switch was to make the city's water supply dangerous and unusable for eighteen months.

If we apply Jaeggi's template for critique to the water crisis in the city of Flint, we see that the crisis concretises two key aspects of Jaeggi's understanding of form of life problems. First, an immediate effect of the switch in Flint's water supply was a functional breakdown in first-order social practices. As weeks passed and greater anxiety grew, habitual social practices such as washing, food preparation, and laundry

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[44] Jaeggi, 2009, 69

[45] My intention here is not to provide an exhaustive account of the Flint water crisis. Rather, my purpose is to use existing accounts to lay out a basic account of the crisis with which to illustrate how the failure of forms of life requires the critic to attend to the first-order issues. For a comprehensive account, see: Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019).

[46] As Laura Pulido describes, 'Under Michigan Public Law 436 EFMs have enormous latitude and decision-making power: they can sell assets, void union contracts, enter into new contracts, and even switch water sources, but the one thing they cannot do is void a contract with bond-holders.' See: Laura Pulido, 'Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism' in, *Capitalism Nature Socialism,* (Vol. 27: No. 3, 2016) 1-16, 9

[47] Graham Cassano and Terressa A. Benz, 'Introduction: Flint and the Racialized Geography of Indifference' in, *Association for Critical Sociology,* (Vol. 45: No. 1, 2019), 25-32, 29

were impossible to perform without risking one's health. Residents complained about the taste ('like metal'),[48] the smell ('like the sewer'), and the appearance ('like urine') of the water.[49] Many residents even started to develop rashes and experience hair loss.[50] Within six months of the switch, 40% of residents's homes in the city had water too dangerous to consume.[51] The consequence of drinking this water is outlined by Perri Zeitz Ruchart:

> Childhood lead exposure can result in damage to the brain and nervous system; slowed growth and development; learning and behavior problems; and hearing and speech problems. […] In adults, exposure to lead can increase risk for high blood pressure, heart disease, and reduced fertility.[52]

Another consequence of the switch was a spike in Legionnaires disease, a form of pneumonia that results from a bacterial infection and causes the lung to inflate. And the chances of a Flint resident being diagnosed with this disease increased six-fold.[53] During the eighteen month period of the crisis, there were eighty-seven reported cases, and twelve residents died of Legionnaires disease.[54] There was also a detrimental financial impact to residents, since residents had to continue paying their water bills and, if they could, pay for bottled water. These then were some of the first-order problems which, Jaeggi's critic would contend, clearly amounted to 'moments of social

[48] Monica Davey, 'Water in Flint is Linked to High Lead in Children' in, *The New York Times*, (October 8, 2015)

[49] Jim Lynch and Chad Livengood, 'Flint Resident: Water Looks Like Urine, Smells Like Sewer' in, *The Detroit News,* (Oct 1, 2015)

[50] Unified Coordination Group, *Flint Rash Investigations: A Report on Findings from Case Interviews, Water Testing, and Dermatologic Screenings for Rashes that Developed or Worsened After October 16, 2015,* (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, 2016), 9

[51] Sarah Hughes, 'Flint, Michigan, and the Politics of Safe Drinking Water in the United States' in, *Perspective son Politics,* (Vol. 19: No. 4, 2021), 1219-32, 1219

[52] Perri Zeitz Ruckhart et al, The Flint Water Crisis: A Coordinated Pubic Health Emergency Response and Recovery Initiative' in, *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice,* (Vol. 25: No. 1, 2019), 84-90, 87

[53] Sammy Zahran et al, 'Assessment of the Legionnaires' Disease Outbreak in Flint, Michigan' in, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* (Vol. 115: No. 8, 2018), 1730-9, 1732

[54] Kris Maher, 'City Urges Aid After Lead in Water' in, *The Wall Street Journal,* (December 16, 2015)

disintegration' moments of social disintegration which, she would insist, disclose an underlying (second-order) breakdown in the norms that underpin forms of life. A claim we now examine.

The breakdown in social practices in Flint can be explained, in part, by a breakdown of second-order problem-solving. Recall that Jaeggi's account of forms of life as second-order problems argues that:

> [A] successful form of life is something can be understood as the result of a successful dynamic of transformation. Conversely, forms of life are bad, irrational, or inappropriate insofar as they are marked by systemic blockages or disruptions with regard to the perception and solution of problems and correspondingly are the result of failed or deficient transformation processes.[55]

Jaeggi's account leads us to expect that as a form of life breakdown, the Flint water crisis would display evidence of 'systemic blockages or disruptions concerning the perception and solution of problems'; and this was demonstrably the case.[56] The source of the crisis was triggered by the failure to treat the Flint River and the pipes to meet the regulation standards set by the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974,[57] passed to enforce standards for water quality and the treatment protocols for lead and copper in water.[58] Such regulations were significant for Flint. Since the Flint River had last served the city in 1967, as Benjamin J. Pauli describes, it 'was popularly known as a repository for shopping carts, old cars, and the occasional corpse.'[59] Flint failed to meet these regulatory standards, fudging the checks and rushing the switch. As a result, not enough chlorine was pumped into the water; chlorine is a chemical necessary to

[55] Jaeggi, 2018, 216
[56] Ibid
[57] Hughes, 2021, 1223
[58] Ibid
[59] Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 3

prevent or reduce the risk of damage by contaminated water was passed on to residents.[60] By September 2015, eighteen months after the switch, the city's plumbed water supply was recorded as containing seventy times the recommended levels of lead by the Environmental Protection Agency.[61] Thus far, the Flint water catastrophe supports the cogency of Jaeggi's account: that what moments of social disintegration disclose to us, is an underlying (second-order) breakdown in the norms that underpin our forms of life. In reflecting on the Flint water catastrophe, Jaeggi's critic focuses on the second-order to grasp the 'necessary contradiction' within the social practice. In Flint, there was a contradiction between the values of public service that ought to guide local governance and the introduction of emergency managers that operated the government like a business. However, I will return to the example of Flint in Section Five, to argue that, despite its initial appeal, there are some weaknesses in Jaeggi's account.

In this brief section, I have demonstrated the initial plausibility of Jaeggi's account by applying her analysis to a glaring, historical, social injustice brought about by the Flint water crisis. In the next section, I introduce Jaeggi's account of responsible reflexive practice, which operates on the capacity of the critic to respond to the phenomenological experience of problems and interpret them accurately.

## III. INTERPRETATION IN REFLEXIVE PRACTICE

A reflexive advantage of Jaeggi's Critical Theory is the importance she attributes to the hermeneutic character of forms of life. Jaeggi's account of the lived experience of persons captures the situated character of critique as a method in which the critic

[60] Zahran et all, 2018, 1732
[61] Ruckhart et al, 2019, 3

cannot step outside of the context of the study, precisely because 'the practices embedded in forms of life are implicit and pre-reflexive.'[62] Forms of life are not passively received nor static clusters of meaning. They are richly hermeneutic entities built upon a schema of interpretations,[63] into which we are habituated by navigating the rules of social practices. As Jaeggi describes, 'when habits work successfully, they become a part of how we move about in our social lives, often residing in the background unbeknownst to us.'[64] We subsequently experience social practices pre-reflexively as habits which become so routinised that they rarely come to be the object of critical scrutiny reflexivity.[65]

For this reason, it is vital to recognise the central role Jaeggi affords to *interpretation* in her account of diagnosis and reflexive practice. Jaeggi presents interpretation as a highly reflexive process through which the critic recognises these problems *as* problems. Jaeggi's vision for Critical Theory involves the critic identifying when the solutions offered by social practices break down and cause forms of life to become *problematic*.[66] Interpretation is thus central to her version of critique since, in order to identify – and ultimately transform – problematic forms of life, the critic must correctly recognise a situation *as* problematic.[67] Jaeggi conveys the central role of interpretation in her account of reflexive practice in Jaeggi's mission statement:

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[62] Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (trans. Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith), (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), 81

[63] Jaeggi, 2018, 63

[64] Eddie S. Glaude Jr, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 56

[65] Jaeggi, 2018, 76

[66] Rahel Jaeggi, 'Criticism and its Discontents: In Defence of an Immanent Critique of Forms of Life' in, *The Value of Critique: Exploring the Interrelations of Value, Critique, and Artistic Labour (Normative Orders),* (eds. Isabelle Graw & Christoph Menke), (Vol. 26, 2019), 87-110, 92

[67] Jaeggi, 2018, 141

> My thesis, then, is as follows: in the theoretical realm (or when we observe things) an interpretation that does not fit means that we do not interpret things appropriately, we do not *understand* them.[68]

This suggests that defective interpretations would lead to insufficient reflexive practice, which in Jaeggi's terms, would constitute a block to learning.

Jaeggi's use of interpretation builds upon Dewey's account of *inquiry* and follows Dewey's conclusion that problems are always *given* and *made.*[69] From an objective perspective, forms of life problems are *given* insofar as they are said to exist independently of a critic's interpretations.[70] The dysfunction and disintegration produced by problems manifest 'as something objectively unavoidable.'[71] But Jaeggi acknowledges the significance of interpretation by reminding us that 'problems always have to be *made* into problems.'[72] Problems must be *made* because Jaeggi believes people experience problems before they understand them. Instead of navigating forms of life with complete transparency in an unmediated fashion, Jaeggi believes agents can usually only understand their experiences by reflecting on them.[73]

The making of problems is, therefore, a reflexive activity that interprets a person's pre-reflexive experience triggered in response to a breakdown in the normal running of things. Jaeggi's account of reflexive practice, therefore, follows a strict lexicality, expressed when she writes:

> It is only when a functioning interaction, an unproblematic performance of an action, or a given interpretation of the world comes to a standstill, when they

[68] Jaeggi, 2014, 125
[69] Jaeggi, 2018, 142
[70] Ibid, 69
[71] Ibid, 143
[72] Ibid, 130
[73] Ibid, 163

> become incoherent or questionable, that we perceive a problem and the process of addressing the problem begins.[74]

In outlining the process of addressing a problem, Jaeggi separates the critic's feeling of incoherence and the reflexive activity of responding to such feelings. This is both an acknowledgement of the hermeneutic character of forms of life and the necessity of responding to reflexive practice.[75]

Jaeggi's point is that due to our habituation into forms of life and their second-order values, when the smooth running of social practices breaks down, it triggers a feeling of 'incongruence'. Incongruity describes the experience of when an objective dysfunction is registered by an individual such that the operation of a social practice becomes incongruous with their normative expectations of that form of life practice. Dewey, once again, is the inspiration here. As Melvin Rogers notes in his reading of Dewey, Dewey believes that when we confront problems, we experience a discontinuity within our experience:

> The continuity within experience is fractured, opening up the necessity for reflection so as to achieve restoration… The feeling of the difficulty requires us to localise and define the problem.[76]

In her account of incongruence, Jaeggi illustrates Dewey's point using the example of a parent 'presenting a final bill for child-rearing.'[77] The idea of charging a child for their upbringing is likely to be experienced as incoherent by most, in Jaeggi's estimation, since it contradicts the bonds of unrequited love and protection that are expected to

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[74] Ibid, 239

[75] Ibid, 141

[76] Melvin Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012), 91

[77] Jaeggi, 2014, 69

characterise parental relations with children. Thus, Jaeggi contends that the experience of incongruence guides the critic's process of diagnosis by attuning them to breakdowns in forms of life. Thus, to 'make' a problem, in Jaeggi's view, means that feelings of incongruence, triggered by objective problems, are recalibrated by the theorist in the process of reflexive interpretation such that they recognise and understand the problem *as a problem.* In the Flint water crisis, for example, the incongruence was dramatic, in the form of plumbed water, usually clear and potable, emerging as brown and poisonous from the taps.

But an account of diagnosis that rests on feelings of incongruence is a very risky one. As Jaeggi herself describes, we find ourselves 'in situations that are determined by normative claims and by ethically shaped interpretations of situations.'[78] When we factor in how the hermeneutic background to forms of life are not neutral but bear the ideological marks of injustices, then our propensity to experience problems and interpret them accurately must contend with these added risks. This risk of ideological mis-interpretation, is illustrated by the conclusions Patrick Moynihan drew in his 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for Action,* in which he attributed personal responsibility for the economic inequality emerging on racial lines in the United States. Moynihan castigated Black communities and claimed that 'At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family.'[79] For Moynihan, the family was 'the basic socialising unit' of American life and the destabilizing effects that emerged as a result of black unemployment, decreased wages, or single-parent households were the result of black citizens.[80] Whilst Moynihan acknowledges the influence of structural factors on unemployment, admitting that they

[78] Jaeggi, 2018, 163

[79] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action,* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965), 5

[80] Ibid

'reflect lack of training and opportunity in the greatest measure,' he is firm in his interpretation that such statistics also 'reflect a certain failure of nerve' by the black population.[81] As Christopher J. Lebron explains, Moynihan's report claimed that 'blacks are the cause of their disproportionate inequality' but still 'blame society for their ills.'[82] Whilst Moynihan's report is notorious for the racist conclusions it reaches in interpreting the conditions of racial inequality, the report serves as an example of the risks of irresponsible diagnoses that might derive either from unjustified feelings of incongruence or the inaccurate interpretation of those feelings.

Despite these risks, Jaeggi's account of the self carries the potential for establishing a reflexively responsible account of interpretation. Her account provides insight into the process of socialisation that persons undergo in forms of life, which would enable one to situate their specific experience of incongruence within their own life. To present this, Jaeggi appeals to Dewey's account of the transactional self to describe the first-person experience of forms of life. In Jaeggi's earlier work, *Alienation*, she presents an account of the self and focuses on the individual and defends an account the individual self, inspired by Dewey, an account of the self which she describes as relational.[83]

Jaeggi's fundamental claim is that 'there is no authentic or untouched subject prior to its being socially formed.'[84] Instead, such is her conception of the self, on a relational conception of the self, the self 'constitutes itself in its relations to the world,' and these relations produce roles and habits.[85] Habits often occur below the level of consciousness, appearing as the practical, habituated, and seemingly instinctive

[81] Ibid, 43
[82] Christopher J. Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 49
[83] Jaeggi, 2014, 159
[84] Ibid, 88
[85] Ibid, 159

responses we have to things we encounter. Glaude Jr. describes that they 'predispose us to see our world in particular ways, and often we consider them helpful things.'[86] Jaeggi takes this up and claims that, at a habitual level, social practices are sequences of actions, they happen frequently and repeatedly, and thus, they are routinised and habituated.[87] This is crucial for the project of a Critical Theory of forms of life since reflexive practice depends on these presuppositions, and Jaeggi herself acknowledges interpretation as a 'constructive process' out of which 'very different shapes could be extracted.'[88] Thus, a reflexively responsible form of interpretation would be expected to factor in distinct feelings of incongruence to one's relational self and scrutinize the legitimacy of such feelings. As I argue in the next section, Jaeggi's account unfortunately fails to achieve this.

In this section, I introduced Jaeggi's method of reflexive critique by using her account of problem diagnosis. In this aspect, the method of critique and reflexive practice entailed by this self-conception of the critic. In the next section, I question the feasibility of Jaeggi's account of interpreting problems to remain reflexively responsible. I show that Jaeggi's account of reflexive practice is irresponsible and vulnerable to epistemic laziness.

## IV. EPISTEMIC LAZINESS

I have established that Jaeggi's position is that critique begins once a form of life is recognised as 'problematic'. Jaeggi acknowledges that different people experience social practices in different ways,[89] stating that:

[86] Glaude, 2017, 55
[87] Jaeggi, 2018, 56
[88] Ibid, 143
[89] Ibid, 145

> [I]t is… absurd to assume that all of us always confront the same problems – as if the problems actually always arise in the same way irrespective of any historical-cultural constellation.[90]

But Jaeggi fails to carry through on the implications that this observation has for responsible reflexive practice, offering little insight as to how differences in the lived experience of forms of life will impact how agents interpret problems.

Given how central Jaeggi's social epistemic framework is to her account of diagnosis,[91] it is reflexively irresponsible for her to overlook how different persons, situated within a nexus of hierarchies of race, class, and gender, might interpret social practices differently as problematic and incongruent. This is clear in contexts of marginalisation, a form of oppression which subjugates certain groups by excluding

[90] Ibid

[91] Jaeggi presents an account of epistemic character that relies on a coherentist epistemology. A coherentist epistemic framework views knowledge as something 'immanent to human belief systems and practices' and emphasises how the process of interconnection in forms of life stabilises the validity of social values (See: Linda Martín Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of Coherence Theory,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 12). This is clarified in Linda M. Alcoff's definition, '[C]oherentism signifies the view that would seek to explain meaning, knowledge, and even truth by reference to the interrelationships between assorted epistemically salient elements' (Alcoff, 1996, 5). In this respect, the conditions of truth are to be understood in the pragmatic tradition as fallible and non-foundational. The social epistemic dimension of Jaeggi's ontology of forms of life should be read as a coherentist project. Only this allows us to connect the Deweyan account of experience that connects Jaeggi's account of subjectivity in *alienation* and the role of interpretation in forms of life. What is relevant here is that our understanding of life emerges from the nexus of standpoint. This nexus is contingent and so how experience is fostered emerges from this contingent nexus. Reading Jaeggi's as a pragmatist Critical Theorist with a coherentist social epistemology allows us to acknowledge how reflexive practice must occur in the context of non-foundational normativity and situated knowing. A coherentist paradigm heightens the role of social location and interpretation within Jaeggi's project. The revisable nature of problem-solving is a more accurate interpretation of Jaeggi's position than alternative readings, such as by Harcourt. In *Critique & Praxis* (2020), Harcourt reads Jaeggi as an epistemic foundationalist (Harcourt, 2020, 8). What Harcourt means by an epistemic foundation is 'Truth with a capital T' (Harcourt, 2020, 187), namely 'a solid foundation on which to ground oneself' (Harcourt, 2020, 185). Harcourt does not refute the possibility of truth, he simply objects to the extension of truth claims to politics, law, or morality (Harcourt, 2020, 185). In these realms, 'Truth is never for always, or universal, or preclusive' (Harcourt, 2020, 187). Jaeggi seems to support this view when she writes: 'If we understand forms of life as interpretive and functional nexuses, therefore, this means that for every practice situated in such a nexus it must be possible to reconstruct a coherent understanding in context of the further practices with which it is interrelated.' (Jaeggi, 2018, 66). Social agents must be capable of recognising the underpinning role of social values, to evaluate their credibility, to recognise when they're problematic, and to be socialised in such a way that they (social values) frame their navigation of forms of life.

them from a society's system of labour. As Iris Marion Young describes, '[m]arginals are people who the system of labour cannot or will not use'[92]; they are 'expelled' from contributing to social life.[93] In extreme cases of marginalisation, such as in the emergence of ghettoes, it creates what the economist Glenn Loury describes as '[c]losed and bounded social structures' that are segregated from other communities.[94] Marginalisation increases the risk that the social problems faced by marginalised communities will be overlooked when the critic is not connected to that community. I believe Jaeggi's vision of interpretative diagnosis risks promoting irresponsible reflexive practice – especially in respect of marginalised groups – in the form of *epistemic laziness*.

As theorised by Jose Medina, epistemic laziness is an example of irresponsible reflexive practice since it describes the epistemic behaviour of someone who closes themselves to self-scrutiny.[95] Classing epistemic laziness as an uncritical form of self-awareness, Medina uses the concept of it to identify a particular failing of self-reflection that is connected to social location and power, and he understands that it 'results from the privilege of not needing to know.'[96] For example, if one is insulated from the structural effects of the market, low income or a lack of financial assets can seem like an individual rather than a structural effect. However, as sociologist Loic Wacquant describes in his case-study of ghettoisation in Chicago, Illinois, the effects of marginalisation are far from being limited to individual decisions; marginalisation

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[92] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 53

[93] Ibid

[94] Glenn Loury, 'Lecture I: Ghettos, Prisons and Racial Stigma' in, *Tanner Lectures* (April 4, 2007)

[95] There are a few differences between Medina's use of epistemic laziness and my own. Medina uses the term to ascribe practices of epistemic agents in general. I apply the term to capture the unwanted effect that Jaeggi's account of reflexive practice is likely to engender. Furthermore, Medina emphasises the mutually reinforcing connection between epistemic arrogance and laziness, such that the arrogant epistemic subject becomes complacent from an attitude of not needing to be curious. This is not what I charge Jaeggi with. Jaeggi's critic is not arrogant, more well-intentioned, and naïve.

[96] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imagination,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 33

forced many residents of the ghetto to have 'little choice but to 'moonlight' on jobs, to 'hustle' for money through a diversity of schemes, or to engage in illegal commerce of various kinds … to 'make that dollar' day to day'.[97] For Medina, then, epistemic laziness is a bad habit that arises as '[c]ontinual epistemic neglect creates blinders that one allows to grow around one's epistemic perspective, constraining and slanting one's vantage point."[98]

Medina fears epistemic laziness will encourage agents to become politically closed-minded, promoting an attitude of privilege that becomes very narrowly focused, targeting very specific perspectives so that one's mind becomes closed off to others.[99] Within the context of Jaeggi's philosophy, epistemic laziness is liable to take hold in one's epistemic character and reduce one's ability to reflect upon one's position within a form of life with regards to others. One major concern is that the very feeling of incongruence might emerge 'from the privilege of not needing to know' that characterizes epistemic laziness.[100] The impact on a critic's diagnosis would produce irrepsonsbile critique.

For example, suppose a person's interactions with the police are limited to occasions when they find themselves in danger and have felt threatened. In that case, such a person will develop very different triggers for incongruence than someone who is a regular victim of stop-and-search policing. Furthermore, persons insulated from regular contact with the police might experience visibly egregious acts of police brutality, such as the suppression of protests or the killing of citizens, as incongruent with their expectations of police action. By contrast, others will likely find such actions to be consistent – that is, *congruent* – with their expectations of police actions. The

[97] Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality,* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 62
[98] Medina, 2013, 33
[99] Ibid, 35
[100] Ibid, 33

responsible critic must therefore assess why specific behaviour might appear incongruent to them. If diagnosis begins once a form of life has become experienced as incongruent, then a reflexively responsible Critical Theory must factor into its method the different starting points of critics whose interpretations are influenced by particular – and different – historical-cultural constellations.

At a general level, Jaeggi, indeed, acknowledges that '[social] practices are inexorably interwoven with attitudes and orientations, insofar as they are always interpreted and not 'raw' practices.'[101] Jaeggi is also aware of the problem that blockages can pose to interpretation and warns us against rigid attitudes to self-regulation whereby persons fail to scrutinise existing norms within new situations – such a failure represents 'a disturbance of self-accessibility, insofar as it means closing oneself off from new experiences.'[102] Blocked learning presents the sort of closed-minded epistemic character that Medina associates with epistemic laziness. Jaeggi describes blockages to self-reflection and learning as 'resistances to experience'[103] and, for her, these include 'anything that prevents us from making connections, that is, anything that presents reality to us as fragmented.'[104] These sorts of epistemic behaviour might include 'shutting one's eyes to conflicting experiences'[105]or 'a refusal to acknowledge conflicting information.'[106]

But despite acknowledging these blockages, Jaeggi fails to consider two aspects of being situated under conditions of marginalisation. First, she ignores how differentiated the incongruity experience is likely to be for persons situated across different axes of wealth, class, race, and privilege. To recognise such differentiation

[101] Jaeggi, 2014, 63
[102] Ibid, 127
[103] Jaeggi, 2018, 231
[104] Ibid, 283
[105] Ibid, 232
[106] Ibid, 231

would require us to factor different social locations into the process of interpretation to ascertain how interpretation might require different strategies, or more rigorous forms of self-reflection, for different persons. Thus, due to such failings, Jaeggi's account of the self encourages an understanding of reflexive practice in which these issues are not significant enough to warrant even formal, methodological recognition. Therefore, Jaeggi is unable to clarify how the critic should deal with their situatedness, and avoid the dangers highlighted by Medina:

> [T]he social positionality of agents does matter for the development of their epistemic character, and that particularly extreme and damaging forms of epistemic vices […] can be found in the privileged classes.[107]

This means that while the sufferings of marginalised communities might be symptomatic of a dysfunction within the capitalist form of life, their contribution to the reproduction of this form of life is minimized, dismissed, or disregarded by the powerful – and may also be overlooked by privileged critics themselves. Such an outcome would produce irresponsible critique.

We get an indication of the reflexive depth necessary to avoid blocked epistemic behaviour in Jaeggi's discussion of Alasdair MacIntyre's account of successive traditions. For example:

> [T]he successor to the deficient (or newly amalgamated) tradition does indeed reflect upon the foundations of validity of the new and the old situation, and in this way it assures itself of its own bases of validity.[108]

[107] Medina, 2013, 40
[108] Jaeggi, 2018, 289

Once again, the abstract character of Jaeggi's work breeds confusion, since she only acknowledges the formal features of being situated within forms of life, such as when she describes:

> Problems become recognizable *as* problems only against the backdrop of a cultural horizon of interpretation and of a normative horizon of expectation.[109]

Unfortunately, Jaeggi adds no insight into how the theorist who diagnoses problems might adjudicate conflicting assessments of a form of life. This lacuna risks promoting a reflexively irresponsible account of critique. Given the centrality of interpretation to Jaeggi's account of reflexive practice, this could undermine Critical Theory's reflexive responsibilities, for, within Jaeggi's account, there seems to be no criterion for balancing competing diagnoses and assessing the weight that should be given to each.

A second problem with Jaeggi's account is that it is too cognitive to address the critic's standpoint. This weakness, I contend, is a failure by Jaeggi to adopt a reflexive gaze that is deep enough to engage with how our hermeneutic experiences become entrenched in the form of habits, potentially becoming inscribed onto bodies and manifested in durable physical dispositions.[110] Instead, she offers a highly cognitivist account of blockages that in fact conflicts with her emphasis on the experiential nature of forms of life. For example:

> [T]he specific blockages to learning in which forms of life can be trapped typically involve forms of collective self-deception or ideology. These are not simply a matter of more or less contingent obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge but of the categorical organization of existing knowledge; thus, they may concern the

[109] Ibid, 234

[110] Lois McNay, 'Gender, Habitus and the Field: Pierre Bourdieu and the Limits of Reflexivity' in ,*Theory, Culture & Society,* (Vol. 16: No. 1, 1999), 95-117, 99

> fundamental question of the conditions under which we (can) have (social) experiences.[111]

If diagnosis relies on incongruence, acknowledging the differentiated experience of forms of life is necessary for establishing how Critical Theory can remain responsive to reflexive practice. Given the central place Jaeggi gives to the hermeneutic experience of forms of life and the diagnosis of problems, it is a surprise that she ignores how critics of different social locations need to adjust the method to correct for 'very different shapes [which] could be extracted' from processes of interpretation.[112]

This is a problem for the ability of Jaeggi's approach to ensure responsible reflexive practice since when forms of life are structured by marginalisation, persons are likely to habituate different expectations that, in turn, establish a different threshold for incongruities. While Jaeggi's hermeneutic account of forms of life appeals to situated knowledge, her account's weakness lies in a refusal to expand on the critical responsibilities that critics face in remaining reflexive to situated knowledge. What we are left with is a description of the learning process achieved by problem-solving, for example:

> [Learning] involves an active appropriation of experience that becomes progressively richer and more differentiated […] It involves a qualitative increase in knowledge that changes the knower herself and the kind of knowledge she possesses and also recognizes her competences.[113]

Unfortunately, what Jaeggi describes as a 'qualitative increase of knowledge'[114] does not extend to a deeper understanding of the pre-reflexive aspects of knowledge

[111] Jaeggi, 2018, 285
[112] Ibid, 143
[113] Ibid, 224
[114] Ibid

developed as part of being situated within one's social location. Thus, the triggers for experiencing problems that are so central to Jaeggi's method of reflexive practice do not start from an even footing amongst differently situated critics; rather, being situated differently produces different barriers to diagnosing forms of life problems. Again, we have the problem that due to the extreme abstraction of Jaeggi's writing she offers no examples here; to illustrate different barriers to diagnosing forms of life problems, I therefore draw again on the problems raised by marginalisation against Black communities in the United States.

This is illustrated by the different interpretations amongst racial groups in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans, on the south-eastern coast of the United States, in 2015. As an example, Katrina illustrates how open such crises are to interpretation and how interpretation is inflected by one's social location and proximity and distance to a crisis. This instance throws into sharp relief the difficulties that arise for Jaeggi's approach, in its failure to properly take into account the situatedness of interpretation and shows how her approach risks promoting irresponsible critique.

Katrina was, firstly, a natural disaster that emerged when winds of up to 120mph struck the Gulf Coast near Louisiana on August 29th 2005. The hurricane killed 1,200 people (directly),[115] left a million residents homeless,[116] and 'laid waste 90,000 square miles, an area the size of the United Kingdom.'[117] But as the Senate committee investigating the fall-out of the hurricane was told, 'the damage in New Orleans due to the high winds and rain paled in comparison to the devastation

[115] Sarah Gibbons, 'Hurricane Katrina, Explained' in, *National Geographic,* (January 16, 2019)

[116] Christopher Cooper and Robert Block, *Disaster: Hurricane Katrina and the Failure of Homeland Security,* (New York, NY: Times Books, 2006), 4

[117] Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report,* (2005), 21

resulting from the flooding.'[118] For example, of the fifty breaches in the hurricane protection system, 'all but four were caused by overtopping and erosion.'[119] The relevance of Jaeggi's framework to such a social breakdown was confirmed when President Barack Obama, speaking ten years after Katrina, described that '[w]hat started out as a natural disaster became a manmade one – a failure of government to look out for its own citizens.'[120]

However, this interpretation of Hurricane Katrina was not shared at the time of the crisis. Michael Dawson's work has explored the interpretative difference social location makes to the experience and interpretation of crises. Writing in the context of Katrina, he noted that White and Black Americans had radically different interpretations of the broader significance and cause of Katrina, particularly, 'on the relationship between racial inequality and the response to Katrina.'[121] Dawson's comments are reinforced by public opinion data gathered by the Pew Research Centre at the time of the hurricane. Answering the question of whether the federal government's response would have been better if most of the victims had been white, only 17% of White respondents agreed, in contrast to 66% of Black respondents who disagreed.[122] This illustrates the deep disagreements cited by Dawson. Compounding this is the second part of Dawson's diagnosis, that these disagreements were rooted in bigger differences of opinions regarding racial inequality in the United States. As Dawson goes on to claim:

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[118] Ibid, 4

[119] G. L. Sils et al, 'Overview of New Orleans Levee Failures: Lessons Learned and Their Impact on National Levee Design and Assessment' in, *Journal of Geotechnical and Geoenvironmental Engineering,* (Vol. 135: No. 5, 2008), 556-65, 558

[120] President Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President on the Ten Year Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina', (August 27, 2005)

[121] Michael Dawson, *Not in Our Lifetimes: The Future of Black Politics,* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 23

[122] Carroll Doherty, 'Remembering Katrina: Wide Racial Divide Over Government's Response' in, *Pew Research Center*, (August 27, 2015), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/27/remembering-katrina-wide-racial-divide-over-governments-response/

> Yet even in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, the majority of whites had worldviews rejecting the belief that lacks remain substantially disadvantaged by race within American society.[123]

This resonates with Pew's additional findings. When the Pew Research Center asked respondents whether the effects of Katrina illustrated that racial inequality was still a significant problem in the United States, only 31% of White respondents agreed, in contrast to 71% of Black ones.[124] The example of Katrina, therefore, illustrates the reflexive risks that Jaeggi's account of interpretation fails to take into consideration. The Pew findings strongly suggest that interpretation of the significance of Katrina was seriously skewed by situated Whiteness. The 'avoidance mechanism' that Medina attributes to the epistemically lazy agent may well have been in operation here and the critic within Jaeggi's framework could easily fall foul of such avoidance mechanism for, as we have seen, Jaeggi's approach pays too little attention to the different barriers with which the critic must engage with to adjust their experiences to unfamiliar forms of life. Since reflexivity is an awareness of the critic of their situation,[125] a robustly reflexive account of diagnosis would be expected to factor in the risks that forms of life, as 'a practical-hermeneutic circle' create.[126] By contrast, Jaeggi's reflexive practice retreats to formalism instead. This is an irresponsible reflexive method because it underplays the relationship between situated knowing and the epistemic effects produced by structural injustices, such as racial marginalization.

In this section, I have shown that Jaeggi's account of reflexive practice risks promoting irresponsible reflexive practice because she gives no significant attention to

[123] Dawson, 2011, 6
[124] Doherty, 2015
[125] Harcourt, 2020, 163
[126] Jaeggi, 2018, 66

the influence played by social positionality. Jaeggi acknowledges the situated conditions of knowing through her account of the transactional self; what is concerning is that she offers no account of how persons with different experiences are to arrive at an adequate diagnosis of problems. In the next section, I show that while Jaeggi's explicit solutions cannot correct epistemic laziness, a responsible reflexive practice can nevertheless be constructed from her work.

## V. REFLEXIVE STANDPOINTS

The accurate diagnosis of a form of life problem relies on one's ability to understand objective dysfunctions *as* problems, but as it stands, Jaeggi's account puts too much faith in the power of interpretation qua critique. Because the process of self-awareness provided by Jaeggi's account of reflexivity is unconcerned with the influence that one's gender, class, or race might have on interpretation, her method of interpretation will not necessarily correct for the biases that underpin feelings of incongruence triggered due to epistemic laziness. My argument in this section is that Jaeggi can reduce the threats of epistemic laziness by incorporating aspects of 'standpoint epistemology' in her account of self-awareness within the process of interpretation. To do so would broaden the range and depth of her account of reflexive practice and, so modified, Jaeggi's approach would be able to answer some of the criticisms levelled in Sections Three and Four.

Standpoint epistemology claims that statements of knowledge are never taken up neutrally by agents but are socially situated in contexts of power and interests. These interests are liable to influence how knowledge claims are taken up. My concern throughout this chapter has been that Jaeggi's account of reflexive practice through interpretation cannot track the biases that stem from being habituated in forms of life

structured by racial oppression. Contrary to Jaeggi's own beliefs, the situatedness of standpoint epistemology is not the same as relativism. What standpoint epistemology does do, however, is acknowledge the impossibility 'that human thought could completely erase the fingerprints that reveal its production process.'[127]

As an example, the ways in which the background conditions constrain how critique takes place, are acknowledged within the epistemic framework laid out by the standpoint theorist Sandra Harding:

> [I]ntuitive experience […] is frequently not a reliable guide to the regularities of nature and social life and their underlying causal tendencies.[128]

In short, Harding claims that critique needs a more robust form of self-reflection that takes stock of social privilege in interrogation. Harding's standpoint theory attempts to uphold a critical standpoint whereby it is claimed that all human beliefs are 'socially situated, but they also require a critical evaluation to determine which social situations tend to generate the most objective knowledge claims.'[129] Jaeggi's neglect of standpoint theory is a surprise since, I argue, it is a natural extension of her account of the transactional self. By combining standpoint theory with Jaeggi's early work in *Alienation*, a more responsible understanding of interpretation can be integrated into Jaeggi's account of reflexive practice.

In this earlier work, Jaeggi sets herself to answer 'how can we distinguish correct from false interpretations?'[130] Jaeggi's account of dysfunctional self-conception – which defines her account of alienation and the inability to appropriate one's life –

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[127] Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity"' in, *The Centennial Review,* (Vol. 36: No. 3, 1992), 437-70, 447

[128] Sandra Harding, '"Strong Objectivity" and Socially Situated Knowledge' in, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991a), 138-63, 163

[129] Ibid, 142

[130] Jaeggi, 2014, 125

offers an account that could be extended to reflexive practice. Jaeggi's account of self-understanding – one's 'self-conception' – is both an *interpretation* and *a project*.[131] I have discussed the role of interpretation at length. The second aspect of self-conception is the role of 'a project'. By this, Jaeggi means that 'a self-conception defines who one would like to be or what one thinks one ought to be.'[132] Usefully, Jaeggi discusses this in the context of one who takes feminist politics to be a significant part of their identity. As she describes, 'I also ask myself who I *want to be* and I orient my future actions and desires toward conduct that fits this conception.'[133] This orientation can be taken up and applied to the telos of reflexive practice with a perfectionist end-point of Critical Theory, which allows us to piece together a more responsible reflexive practice from her work.

By appealing to the formation of the self, Jaeggi means that achieving an understanding of the self involves an engagement with oneself, with 'a given material, the facts of our life history.'[134] She offers extensive detail of this in her own description of self-transparency:

> Hence self-accessibility in general can be characterized as a complex cognitive and emotional state that includes being sufficiently familiar with oneself to be able to perceive one's own needs, to interpret them, and to draw practical consequences from them. Our true self, then, is not merely one that is acquired in the absence of compulsion; it is, formulated positively, a self-relation in which we can move freely and in which we are accessible to ourselves.[135]

[131] Ibid, 123
[132] Ibid, 124
[133] Ibid
[134] Ibid
[135] Ibid, 128

If we translate Jaeggi's language of self-conception into the methodological ambitions of problem diagnosis (i.e., reflexive practice), it would require the critic to reflect on their epistemic coherence. Reflecting on one's coherence might involve, for example, considering what triggered a feeling of incongruence, or probing why this feeling was early, delayed, or simply different to those felt by others. In short, this heightened self-reflection would look at how the interpretation of problems is refracted through the standpoint of the individual critic. This would increase the reflexive responsibility of Jaeggi's method, since it would serve as a practical step of ensuring that social problems are not assumed to be experienced ubiquitously.

It is pretty straightforward, therefore, to consider how Jaeggi's account of the experiential dimension of forms of life and the transactional self might be supplemented by forms of self-reflection, which, like Harding's standpoint theory, considers one's social location to be a significant aspect of the 'given material.'[136] Standpoint theory claims that certain participants in forms of life are better situated to evaluate these claims than others. As Harding suggests, standpoint epistemology:

> [C]laims that all knowledge attempts are socially situated, and that some of these objective social locations are better than others as starting points for knowledge projects.[137]

Harding's justification for the role of standpoint in our epistemic analyses can be found in two aspects of Jaeggi's own position. Firstly, the belief that our knowledge claims are already socially situated. Secondly, the claim that the self is made up of the contingent transactions of an individual's environment.[138] Aspects of epistemic

[136] Sandra Harding, Feminist Epistemology In and After the Enlightenment' in, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991b), 164-90, 165

[137] Harding, 1992, 444

[138] Ibid, 443

responsibility would therefore need to address questions relating to one's reflexivity to one's social location: *how do I benefit from the problem? How do I experience the form of life as a first-order dysfunction?* It would involve Jaeggi's critic subjecting themselves, as the culmination of their transactions, to scrutiny in order to gain a perspective on their interpretations. For example, in the Flint water crisis, how does one's interpretation change if the critic comes from a historically marginalized community?

In this section, I have suggested a means by which Jaeggi can radicalize her reflexive practice to account for the weaknesses in her account of interpretation. In the context of Jaeggi's account of interpretation, it would entail a *responsibility* to alleviate the risk of epistemic laziness. However, even if Jaeggi can radicalize her reflexive practice to account for the weaknesses in her account of interpretation, due to her focus on second-order problems, her method risks misunderstanding the crises which befall forms of life. This is what I establish in the final section.

## VI. MORE SECOND-ORDER PROBLEMS

Jaeggi's approach to Critical Theory directs the critic to look beyond first-order problems and make the normative values the central object of analysis. Like Forst, she believes that the failure of a form of life exhibits not merely an empirical (first-order) problem associated with a functional coordination problem, but a conceptual (second-order) problem defined by the normative failure of social practices to respond to a problem. She states this clearly:

> [S]olving forms of life problems will be more demanding than solving first-order problems. This is because only any such solution must fit into a given context; it must constitute the conceptually adequate solution to a conceptually posited

> problem and must be able to fit into the normative problem horizon and problem status of a given form of life.[139]

By placing second-order problems at the centre of her project, Jaeggi is saying that second-order problems are the most demanding ones for a critic. First-order problems are thus engaged only insofar as they serve as symptoms of more fundamental second-order problems. But this conclusion can be upheld only by underplaying the complexity of the problems facing different social groups, thereby reducing the reflexive adequacy of a Critical Theory.

Returning to the water crisis in Flint makes clear the limitations of Jaeggi's elevation of second-order problems. The crisis highlights how important it is for the theorist to contend with first-order problems since these define the unliveable aspects of oppressive of forms of life.[140] Thus, when the diagnostic significance of first-order problems is underplayed, methods such as Jaeggi's restrict a Critical Theorist's capacity to account for the structural complexities of intersecting oppressions, which increases the likelihood of producing irresponsible critique. When Jaeggi reduces problems to underlying conceptual breakdowns of social practices, such a method underplays the lived experience of marginalisation, described by philosopher Cornell West as 'the irreducible predicament of unique individuals who undergo dread, despair, disillusionment, disease, and death *and* the institutional forms of oppression that dehumanize people.'[141] Looking at these tragic, first-order injustices of marginalisation is, therefore, one example of how forms of life problems exceed the second-order and show material barriers which persist beyond issues of social reflexivity. Therefore,

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[139] Jaeggi, 2018, 170

[140] Max Pensky, 'In Search of the Negative in Rahel Jaeggi's *Kritik vin Lebensformen'* in, *From Alienation to Forms of Life: The Critical Theory of Rahel Jaeggi* (eds. Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta), (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 76-97, 76

[141] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism,* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 228

such first-order injustices ought to be of diagnostic and transformative concern to Critical Theorists.

As stated in Section Two, Jaeggi's framework holds much ground when assessing crises such as the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. The basis for using Emergency Financial Managers to solve governmental problems was demonstrated to be inadequate to meet the problems facing Flint. As Michael Steinberg, legal director for the Michigan branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, described in an interview with *The Michigan Chronicle* in 2015, "'In their short-sighted effort to save a buck, the leaders who were supposed to be protecting Flint's citizens instead left them exposed to dangerously high levels of lead contamination.'"[142] Similar sentiments were shared by Reverent Alfred Harris, interviewed by *The New York Times*, who said: 'Anytime you have to weigh money against the health and welfare of people, it always has to be the health and welfare you go with.'[143] Thus, in the local government's effort to put profit before citizens' welfare, it is clear that the failure of the Emergency Financial Managers to address the problem presented a failure in the underlying rule of the city's management.

Furthermore, the history of marginalisation that underpinned the water crisis in Flint lends support to Jaeggi's attempt to identify an immanent contradiction within the values that underpin our collective social practices, specifically, the inherent failure of capitalist markets to distribute putative public goods fairly. As stated earlier, Jaeggi believes the second-order value underpinning capitalist civil society is 'the promise of achieving a position within society through work in which one can provide for one's own livelihood and thereby enjoy recognition.'[144] Societies marked by marginalisation,

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[142] Anonymous, 'Flint Residents to Sue City, State Over Lead in Drinking Water' in, *Michigan Chronicle*, (November 25, 2015)

[143] Monica Davey, 'Flint's Water is Linked to High Lead Levels' in, *The New York Times,* (October 8, 2015)

[144] Jaeggi, 2018, 162

such as Flint, represent a failure of the self-understanding of that form of life. A clear picture of the economic crisis facing the city of Flint before the water crisis is drawn by Peter J. Hammer. By 2016, the city's poverty rate of 40% was the second highest in the United States.[145] The cause of this poverty was a combination of transformations in local industry and the demographic shifts that occurred as a result. Local income for the city of Flint – 'Vehicle City' – had been stabilised by General Motors, formerly as the 'Durant-Dort Carriage Company', in one form or another since 1886.[146] But General Motors had reduced work in the city since the 1960s, which, as Cassano and Benz note, reduced the city's tax income and local employment.[147] Thus, as Flint resident Keith A. Owens explained the crisis to *The Michigan Chronical:*

> "This is not something that happened suddenly," he said. "This is a rape of a community that is basically naïve and has been in a state of shock and they have not recovered," from the demise of the auto industry upon which Flint so heavily depended for so many years.[148]

The history of Flint therefore adds context to the breakdown of forms of life that precipitated the water crisis.

This is compounded by the noticeable failure in the history of local government to deal with the long-term changes in the local economy. Flint lost 77% of manufacturing employment and 41% of the overall employment since 1980.[149] As reported in the *Michigan Citizen* on 29 June 2014, 'In 1978, according to one study,

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[145] Peter J. Hammer, 'The Flint Water Crisis, the Karegnondi Water Authority and Strategic-Structural Racism' in, *Critical Sociology,* (Vol. 45: No. 1, 2019), 103-19, 107

[146] Emily Bingham, 'Michigan History: Why Flint's 'Vehicle City' Nickname Has Nothing to Do With Cars' in, *The Flint Journal,* (May 25, 2017)

[147] Cassano and Benz, 2019, 29

[148] Keith A. Owens, 'Flint, The Inevitable Tragedy' in, *Michigan Chronicle,* (January 20, 2016)

[149] Bérengère Sim, 'Poor and African American in Flint: The Water Crisis and its Trapped Population' in, *The State of Environment Migration 2016: Review of the Year 2015* (eds. F. Gemenne, C. Zickgraf, and D. Ionesco), (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2016), 77-101, 78

[General Motors] facilities in Flint employed more than 80,000 people; the number now is about 7,500.'[150] When seen in the broader demographic shifts of the city, these figures are striking: Flint's overall population halved to around 100,000, specifically, the White population fell by 130,000 to reach 38,000 in the fifty years leading up to 2010, the Black population doubled to 67,000.[151] These demographic shifts included the movement out of Flint of the White population and the Black middle-classes. The impact of this was both a reduced tax resource and also a disproportionate concentration of the working class in Flint. Peter J. Hammer outlines how between 2006 and 2016, Flint's municipal revenue collapsed: income tax fell 39%, property tax fell 33%, and state revenue fell 33%.[152]

The economic conditions complicated the problem-solving capacity of the local government to maintain infrastructure, such as addressing a 'deteriorating infrastructure' of 'crumbling pipes.'[153] As *Michigan News* reported at the time, the failure to digitizeitise the city's catalogues of the most vulnerable pipes reduced the speed with which the water crisis could be addressed:

> The city had information about which Flint homes had old pipes more susceptible to leaching lead into the water, but couldn't easily access them because the information was on 45,000 index cards.[154]

This 'archaic way Flint catalogued its information' is another example of how the history of marginalisation framed the Flint water crisis in a way which can be explained by Jaeggi's discussion of second-order crises.[155]

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[150] Curt Guyette, 'Flint's Big Gulp' in, *The Michigan Citizen,* (June 29, 2014)
[151] Hammer, 2019, 107
[152] Ibid, 108
[153] Pulido, 2016, 4
[154] John Counts, 'How Government Poisoned the People of Flint' in, *The Flint Journal,* (January 21, 2016)
[155] Ibid

But the deeper we explore the intersecting problems between class and structural racism, the more the insufficiency of a second-order lens to studying social crises becomes apparent. If Critical Theory is to diagnose forms of oppression, we can't just focus on the failure of institutions or social practices to uphold our values. We need also to identify how the failure of social practices produces distinct experiences of harm, in part because they exacerbate pre-existing inequalities between groups. First-order problems are more complex than Jaeggi acknowledges. They often arise from a constellation of problems, such as race, class, and geography. In these intersectional problems, we are dealing with how people in particular first-order social locations experience forms of life as unliveable in a distinct way. They reveal that the inequality of the Flint water crisis emerged through unequal material participation of forms of life. And was experienced unequally again due to unequal material participation in forms of life. Jaeggi's Critical Theory promotes irresponsible diagnosis, therefore, due to her emphasis of abstracting from the direct experience of problems. Her theory is, therefore, unable to diagnose the specific relationship between the failure of second-order value and the distinct experience of this by different groups.

The irresponsibility of this approach to Critical Theory can be seen through Max Pensky's critique of Jaeggi. The concept of the unliveable is introduced by Penksy, who is concerned that Jaeggi's project is so wedded to an account of collective learning (via determinate negation) that she ends up with a too abstract account of forms of life, one that produces an anaemic account which fails to properly characterize the extreme experience of social oppression, the experience which he terms 'unliveability':

> The form of life becomes unliveable: one cannot fully inhabit the form of life without being both obliged and forbidden to take one and the same course of norm-directed action, since the norm itself is in a relation of negation to itself, in

> distinction to external, contingent conditions that make practices demanded by the norm difficult or circumstantially impossible to perform.[156]

Barbara Noyce, a citizen of Flint, who spoke in the film, *Flint: The Poisoning of an American City,* captures the unliveability of the water crisis in her assessment of her situation:

> [H]ow are we going to get around it? I can't afford to move, I can't afford to stay there. I can't afford to keep paying for water I can't use. You got to take baths, you got to do laundry, you got clean homes. What do you do when you're in this state? There's nothing you can do. Live one day to a time and wonder when it's going to kill me, I guess.[157]

The experience of failed forms of life illustrates how the unliveability of forms of life is experienced as a *first-order problem,*[158] not one *with the forms of life,* but specific problems *for that form of life,* or rather, *for particular participants of that form of life. Problems* are deeply destabilizing, and forms of life *fail*, not due exclusively to values, but due to the disproportionately felt material effects of first-order problems. In this respect, the experience of the unliveability of forms of life requires Jaeggi to reconsider some of the driving points of her project.

Jaeggi might respond to this and acknowledge the importance of intersectional complexity to her account. Jaeggi tells us that 'critique can no longer be a matter of unmasking the one, or central contradiction of capitalist society,' for it is not just an issue of function nor is it one of colonisation of democratic aspects of the public sphere, but there are 'pluralistic, multiple and sometimes colliding contradictions'

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156 Pensky, 2018, 56

157 David Barnhart (Director), *Flint: The Poising of an American City* (Film), 2019

158 Pensky, 2018, 56

which must be 'unmasked.'[159] This gives us, potentially, insight into the plurality of broken experiences that define a form of life crisis. However, the problem is that this complexity still operates at the level of conceptual, second-order problems.

While the experience of failed forms of life might resonate with others, if Critical Theory is to see how issues of race, gender, and class work, it cannot abstract to the realm of social reflexivity and neglect all else. If it does, the researcher risks overlooking the oppressed and marginalising them further. But to know why that is the case and to collaborate and recognise solutions, Critical Theory must attend to the first-order level. Doing so allows us to diagnose the intersectional effect of structural injustice and heightens epistemic responsibility.

The example of Flint illuminates the tragic experiences of social suffering which is specific to intersecting oppressions of forms of life. By focusing on the first-order experiences of the water crisis in Flint, we can bring the context of distinct intersecting histories of inequalities into sharper focus than by employing a method that follows Jaeggi's approach and focuses on the insufficiency of shared norms. Rather than being symptomatic of second-order failures, they can be seen to have explanatory parity with the second-order, since the distinct effects of marginalisation are only understood through the first-order experiences that are situated and not always interchangeable.

We see this in interviews conducted with residents by reporters in Flint, which help us to recognise how pre-existing first-order problems predispose persons to unique vulnerabilities in crises. Thus, while one resident acknowledged that '[m]y cat gets bottled water, our plants get bottled water, our fish gets bottled water,' others interviewed during the crisis, such as social worker, Lisa Horne, recognised that

[159] Jaeggi, 2009, 79

'[t]hose who don't have the resources […] don't even have a choice.'[160] For example, Tammy Loren spoke to the *New York Times* in 2016 which reported:

> Her family started drinking bottled water when it could, but Ms. Loren, who receives federal disability payments for her back and other problems and relies on food stamps, said it was not that often. "There was times when we couldn't afford it," she said. "We just kept drinking out of the tap."[161]

Even more shocking was an investigation conducted by *Democracy Now* into the effects of the water crisis on inmates at the Genesee County Jail in Flint:

> While many Flint residents have been buying bottled water throughout this crisis, inmates at the jail have had no option but to drink and shower in the city water following the switch to the corrosive Flint River more than a year ago […] the inmates were forced to drink, bathe in and eat food cooked in the city's contaminated water.[162]

These examples make us recognise how different social locations and histories point to specific first-order problems. The experience of the unliveability of forms of life requires Jaeggi to reconsider some of the driving points of her project. Critique must attend both to first and second-order problems. An exclusive commitment to second-order issues raises diagnostic and transformative obstacles to Jaeggi's Critical Theory that produces inadequate diagnoses.

The problem gets to the heart of Jaeggi's understanding of crises. If the critic's role is the negativist one of diagnosing problems, the primacy given to second-order

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[160] Barnhart, 2019

[161] Abby Goodnough, Monica Davey, and Mitch Smith, 'When the Water Turned Brown' in, *The New York Times,* (January 23, 2016)

[162] Democracy Now!, 'How Long Did Flint's County Jail Inmates Drink Poisoned Water?' in, *Democracy Now!,* (February 4, 2016)

problems risks producing too general an account of crises that cannot capture the distinct experiences of crises by marginalised groups. It's hard to track the personal significance at a second-order level. Yes, freedom is not being executed or fulfilled, but 'lack of freedom' under-describes the unliveability of life for many situated sufferers. While a crisis might be explained by a collapse in social practices, what makes a crisis unbearable for certain persons can only be understood by analysing how they are predisposed to experiencing the crisis. A focus on the collapse of shared second-order values cannot unearth this sort of insight. Only attention to the first-order experiences can help Jaeggi refine her account of crises.

In this final section, I have illustrated the limitations of Jaeggi's formal second-order account of diagnoses in tracking the unliveability of breakdowns in forms of life. Through the example of the Flint water crisis, I have shown that the formalism of a second-order approach is unable to capture the intersecting dynamics of form of life crises, nor is it adequate to capture the differentiated experience of suffering under crises.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have shown that Jaeggi's project has been shown to operate at the level of second-order problems. Jaeggi's priority is conceptual and she explores how empirical first-order problems disclose more serious second-order problems. This has political implications for a project of Critical Theory. The example of the Flint Water Crisis illustrates the limits to a Critical Theory centred on second-order analysis. It shows that such a methodology is potentially irresponsible as it overlooks how issues are not simply explained by conceptual blockages. Social change – effective crisis prevention – must focus on tackling immediate injustices exacerbated by one another

through their interaction. Despite Jaeggi's focus on the incongruent experience of problems, her second-order lens removes attention away from the experience of crises and the distinct ways in which forms of life problems confront different groups.

As the water crisis in Flint showed, distinct first-order experiences are both crucial to understanding the lived experience of crises and identifying tailored solutions to diagnosed historical effects. My challenge to Jaeggi is not that her ontology is unable to describe practice problems. Jaeggi's ontology of a nexus of social practices captures the complexity of interacting things that shape social reproduction. But her explanations fail to do justice to the intersecting aspects of such crises. Jaeggi undermines any understanding of the different experiences of social practices. These manifest in distinct first-order experiences, as in Flint, where problems are exacerbated by poor working-class residents. Thus, it is the process of reflexivity that is unable to grasp sources of problems which it is meant to track; Jaeggi's account of reflexivity is not able to remain attuned to problems that would arise concerning racist forms of life.

Despite Jaeggi's methodological differences to Forst, there is a similarity in their approach to Critical Theory that roots diagnosis in shared second-order problems. This shared commitment to matters of the second-order draws its motivation from an attempt to secure a more responsible diagnosis that avoids relativism. The problem with each is that both – in different ways – sustain their analysis of second-order analyses only by underplaying the distinct first-order experiences of these injustices. This prevents their work from providing an accurate diagnosis to capture the injustices under investigation. In the next chapter, I explore how these Kantian and Hegelian approaches to reflexive practice have been used in a distinctive approach taken by some Critical Theorists: aesthetic reflexivity.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *REFLEXIVITY AND AESTHETICS*

# Chapter Four
## Reflexivity and Aesthetics

The Kantian and Left-Hegelian traditions of Critical Theory discussed so far, have articulated reflexive practice in relation to competing understandings of rationality. This chapter considers how these two approaches have been employed to describe a particular kind of reflexive insight: aesthetic experience. The use of aesthetics in Critical Theory is characterised by the concept of 'disclosure', which assumes the ability of artworks to interrupt a person's everyday experience of the world and enable them to see something previously obscured from our attention.[1] The appeal of aesthetic experience in the tradition of Critical Theory is illuminated by the Greek etymology of 'aesthetics', which emphasises its connection to *perception* and *sensibility*.[2] Since Critical Theories are practical inquiries into the conditions of social injustice and attempt to expose and explain the processes that obscure injustices,[3] the possibilities that this contribution of aesthetic experience, as the etymology suggests, is its capacity to cast social conditions in a new light, allowing the critic to perceive them differently. Given the distinct role attributed to aesthetic reflection as a form of reflexive practice and its significance in the history of Critical Theory, it is, therefore, essential to devote this chapter to examining it.

This chapter argues that the use of aesthetic reflexivity in Critical Theory has given too little attention to how our sensory experience is involved in the production of social meaning. I demonstrate why approaches that focus on disclosure but ignore

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[1] Lois McNay, 'The Politics of Exemplarity: Ferrara on the Disclosure of New Political Worlds' in, *Philosophy & Social Criticism,* (Vol. 45: No. 2, 2020), 1-19, 2

[2] Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 94

[3] Axel Honneth, 'A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory' in, *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* (ed. Fred Rush), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 336-60, 346

the social meanings that frame these experiences are reflexively irresponsible. Having laid out in Section One, two broad perspectives on the reflexive potential of aesthetic experience found in Critical Theory, I demonstrate in Section Two how aesthetic experiences are implicated in wider structures of ideology, using the example of racialisation and how it informs the disclosure of artworks.

I show that because artworks are not immune from the influence of ideologies, a reflexively responsible engagement with aesthetic experience ought to take into account how aesthetic experiences are always situated within hermeneutic contexts. Engaging in disclosive experience and receiving the reflexive possibilities afforded by aesthetics is bound deeply up with the social location of the viewer. To this extent, aesthetic disclosure is no different from reflexive practice more generally**.** I show this by considering how the Hegelian and Kantian approaches to Critical Theory discussed so far in this dissertation, have also been applied to issues of aesthetic reflexivity. I do this by considering the work of Theodor W. Adorno (Section Three), Alessandro Ferrara (Section Four), and Martin Seel (Section Five). I use the example of racialisation to show how Critical Theorists have overlooked the ideological backdrop to our aesthetic experiences.

I do not encourage Critical Theory to abandon aesthetics but caution against over investing in its reflexive contributions. Rather, I argue that a responsible account of the reflexive possibilities of aesthetics should capture the inherent unpredictability of aesthetic experiences, that the insights provoked in disclosive experiences depend on an interaction with our presuppositions as situated knowers. Furthermore, I push back against any suggestion that aesthetic experiences might serve as a sufficient means of reflexive practice. I show that it is far more responsible to understand that the radical insights made possible by works of art sometimes depend on extra-aesthetic experiences, such as consciousness-raising between peers in discourse. Situating

aesthetic experiences within the broader realm of political interests and activities, therefore, allows us to acknowledge the limitations of aesthetic disclosure and to understand why some might miss these disclosive experiences. This chapter thus builds on the insights of the previous three chapters and shows how the Hegelian and Kantian understandings of reflexive practice have been used to articulate the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experiences.

## I. AESTHETICS AND REFLEXIVITY

Since Jürgen Habermas's effort to establish a firm normative foundational for critique, aesthetic analyses have moved to the periphery of Critical Theory's social analysis. Habermas sought to ground the diagnoses of Critical Theory in shareable reasons and considered aesthetics to be too subjective to provide reliable insight to critics. In short, Habermas saw the interpretive nature of aesthetic claims as a reflexively irresponsible basis on which to justify one's diagnosis. But this scepticism of the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience was not shared by the early Critical Theorists, such as Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse. Influenced by the German Romanticist tradition of aesthetics, which claimed aesthetics was important for training our critical faculties to break through our normal orientation to the world and enable them 'to see the world differently,'[4] the early Critical Theorists believed aesthetic experience could make valuable contributions to our diagnoses. They believed aesthetic reflection produced a perspective on society capable of reducing the influence of ideology, a position expressed by Marcuse when he wrote that 'art

[4] McNay, 2020, 10

expresses a truth, an experience.'[5] Thus, the history of Critical Theory can be roughly carved up between those who promoted the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience and those who dismissed aesthetic claims as reflexively irresponsible.

The early Critical Theorists invested so much faith in the reflexive potential of aesthetic experience due to a belief that it was underpinned by a distinct logic,[6] capable of stimulating 'other' pre-cognitive or intuitive experiences that could not be grasped by deductive reasoning.[7] The historian Martin Jay alludes to this particular quality that the early Critical Theorists identified with aesthetic experience when he describes that, through aesthetic experience, 'truths are disclosed, brought to light, made present, rather than the result of analysis, constitution, or reflection."[8] Aesthetic experiences were, therefore, considered reflexively valuable as they were believed to encourage a more intuitive and less instrumental interaction with the world, capable of subverting our everyday experience of the world.[9]

In contrast to forms of rational arguments, which present claims through premises and conclusions, the early Critical Theorists considered that aesthetic experiences changed one's perception of the world in non-propositional ways. Rather than appealing to logic to unsettle our beliefs, aesthetic experiences were thought to operate at a level beneath argument, producing feelings of shock and disruption that play on our feelings. They are capable of unveiling something new to us by interrupting our expectations of the world, which are later recalibrated into our formal frameworks.[10] These outcomes were – and are – understood as 'disclosive' experiences.

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[5] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics,* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1978), 1

[6] Martin Jay, *Reason After Its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory,* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 14

[7] Ibid, 10

[8] Ibid, 15

[9] Marcuse, 1978, 10

[10] McNay, 2020, 7

This experience is capable of then changing our future experiences of the world, and thereby the experience produces reflexive outcomes.

Thus, there is a crucial difference to the reflexive operation of aesthetic experiences compared to the accounts of reflexive practice outlined in the previous two chapters. These reflexive possibilities claim to disrupt our immediate (first-order) experience of the world (through disclosure) in order to reveal something about our underlying (second-order) values.[11] What is distinct, however, from the reflexive potential of aesthetic experience is how this disruption is produced through disclosure.

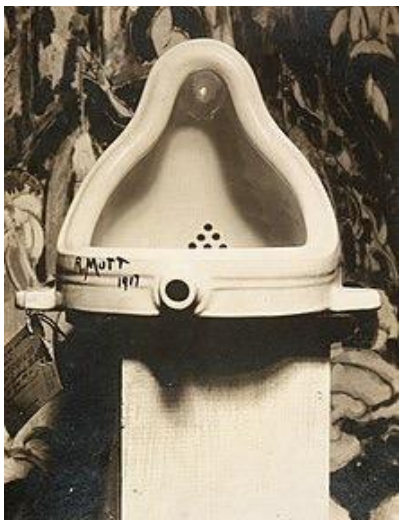
Consider Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917). The work probes the ontological question of 'what is art?' But the opinions of the readers of *The Blind Man* magazine,[12] who saw Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of an upturned ceramic urinal, were not unsettled by rational argument.[13] Duchamp's *Fountain* used shock and disorientation to disclose the limits of art, by upturning a ceramic urinal, placing it on a pedestal, and, as if it were any other artwork, signing it 'R. Mutt'. As art historian William Camfield claims, the disclosive work of Duchamp's *Fountain* is to reorientate the audience's relationship to art by reorienting their perception of an everyday object. Not only is the object – a urinal – transposed from its normal location, its presentation shifts by turning it 90º on its back. As Camfield cites, the editorial in *The Blind Man* described how the piece's 'useful significance disappears [and] created a new thought for that

[11] Lydia Goehr describes, for Theodor W. Adorno, following Walter Benjamin, the aim of interpretation of a work is not a direct correspondence or translation, 'but to reveal something in the work that the work itself cannot directly say: the work's social or historical truth content.' For Adorno, this *truth content* doesn't refer to some direct *thing:* i.e. that Beethoven's *Eroica* is about Napoleon. Rather, music 'critique[s]… the social and philosophical knowledge drawn from the movement of our concepts.' See: Lydia Goehr, *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008)

[12] The disruption caused by *Fountain* was enough to have it removed from the open-access exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists in New York just prior to its public opening. Hence, audiences were first exposed to the artwork in *The Blind Man.*

[13] William Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain:* Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917' in, *Dada/Surrealism,* (Vol. 16: No. 1, 1987), 64-94, 65-68

object.'[14] What distinguishes the reflexive process of disclosure, therefore, is that reflexive possibilities afforded by an artwork like Duchamp's occurs at a level before argumentation. It is how the artwork interrupts our expectations at, in the minds of the early Critical Theorists at least, a more intuitive level of engagement. Known also as *The Madonna of the Bathroom,* an even more provocative title, Duchamp's *Fountain,* therefore, reorientates our relation to the mundane and our expectations of art and questions the role of institutions in defining the parameters of art and our aesthetic relation to objects of everyday life. *Fountain* is an example of aesthetic disclosure operating self-referentially because the piece shocked the viewer into reassessing their thoughts on the nature of art and serves as an example of the reflexive possibilities which the early Critical Theorists attributed to aesthetic experience. By triggering a heightened awareness of the ways that social and structural conditions inhibit the activity of critique,[15] the early Critical Theorists attributed an important political dimension to disclosure that could contribute through disclosure to the diagnostic and transformative ambitions of critique.




[14] Ibid, 78

[15] Robin Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding,* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), Ch. 3, Epub

Marcuse's account of the enlightening potential of the aesthetic is a useful example of how the early Critical Theorists viewed aesthetic experience as a distinct form of reflexive practice. Despite Marcuse's reputation for encouraging direct political action, earned by his involvement in the student protests of 1968,[16] he remained committed to the transformative potential of aesthetics.[17] Even in a world requiring structural change, Marcuse thought we could justify retreating to questions of aesthetics, to a realm in which transformation is something limited to the imagination,[18] because he believed aesthetic experiences were capable of 'estranging' persons from the ideological aspects of capitalist society,[19] presenting audiences with a 're-presentation of reality.'[20] Marcuse outlines the reflexive value of aesthetics in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1977) and describes aesthetics as a form of ideology critique. Marcuse introduces the aesthetic contribution to Critical Theory:

> Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle. Subjects and object encounter the appearance of that autonomy which is denied them in their society. The encounter with the truth of art happens in the estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life.[21]

The 'established reality principle' is the instrumental relation that the early Critical Theorists believed characterized a person's orientation to the world and to one another under capitalism. Because disclosive experiences destabilise our field of expectations,

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[16] See: Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, 'Correspondence on the German Student Movement' (trans. Esther Leslie) in, *New Left Review*, (Vol. 233: No. 1, 1999), 118-36

[17] Marcuse, 1978, xi

[18] Ibid, 1

[19] Ibid, 8

[20] Ibid, 47

[21] Ibid, 72

Critical Theorists considered they made a reflexive contribution by casting the situation of study in a new light and could unsettle the reality principle. Thus, Marcuse describes how encountering the truth of art fosters a form of critical consciousness: 'a counter-consciousness: negation of the realistic-conformist mind.'[22] Thus, for the early Critical Theorists, the disclosive character of aesthetics contributed to the diagnostic and transformative ambitions of reflexive practice.[23]

The later work of Habermas pushed back against the reflexive faith his Frankfurt School predecessors placed in aesthetic experience. Instead, Habermas rejected the reflexive possibilities attributed to aesthetic experience. His project cast doubt on the validity of aesthetic claims, arguing that a focus on subjective experience was more likely to hinder, rather than enhance, a critic's reflexive practice. While aesthetic experiences – in Habermas's view – do deliver insight, Habermas's reticence to their use in social analysis is that he considers these insights are not generalisable. He justifies this analysis by distinguishing between three kinds of validity: *cognitive-instrumental rationality,* which is tied to specialism and science and raise validity claims to *truth; moral-practical rationality*, which is tied to the production of normative actions and raise validity claims to *rightness;* and finally, *aesthetic-practical rationality*, which Habermas claims to be tied to pleasure-seeking and raise validity claims to *truthfulness*.[24] Habermas uses these distinctions to illustrate the non-generalisability of aesthetic claims to truth and, by extension, to demonstrate why it is reflexively irresponsible to tie Critical Theory's diagnoses to such an approach.

Habermas's concerns regarding the structure of aesthetic experience raises two problems for those who defend the reflexive possibilities of disclosure. First,

[22] Ibid, 9
[23] Celikates, 2018, Ch. 3
[24] Ibid, 240

Habermas questions the transmissibility of disclosive insights. He only considers claims to truth and morality produce mutual understanding amongst participants in discourse. By contrast, aesthetic experiences cannot supply the validity necessary to establish mutually agreeable (context-transcending) claims. As he writes in the first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), claims to truthfulness could not meet with general assent since the 'arguments that serve to justify standards of value do not satisfy the conditions of discourse.' [25] Because Habermas does not consider aesthetic disclosures to be generalisable,[26] it would be reflexively irresponsible to base our diagnoses on these experiences. In his estimation, artworks are closer to ethical claims than moral ones and must be excluded from the learning processes in which societies might develop more sophisticated 'visions of their own collective good, health, and happiness.'[27] Habermas, therefore, rejects the idea that artworks make any appeal to truth.

Second, Habermas judges disclosive experiences to be reflexively irresponsible precisely because they operate pre-cognitively by playing on our emotions rather than reasons. The Habermasian Critical Theorist Maeve Cooke adds more context to this and describes how disclosure works *effectively* and 'such experiences make us *feel* that things must and could be different.'[28] Habermas justifies his reservations regarding the reflexive contributions of aesthetic experience by warning us of their liability to the strategic effects that *dramaturgical* action can have on communication.[29] By appealing to the rhetorical effects he experienced under German National Socialism, Habermas points to the manipulative possibilities of disclosive experiences to manifest

[25] Habermas, 20

[26] David Ingram, 'Habermas on Aesthetics and Rationality: Completing the Project of Enlightenment' in, *New German Critique,* (Vol. 53: 1991), 67-103, 79

[27] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action (Volume 1): Reason and the Rationalisation of Society* (trans. Thomas McCarthy), (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 20

[28] Maeve Cooke, 'Truth in Narrative Fiction' in, *Philosophy & Social Criticism,* (Vol. 40: No. 7, 2014), 629-43, 632

[29] Habermas, 1995, 93

themselves politically in effect like fascist propaganda. Thus, one of Habermas's main contributions is to emphasise how our aesthetic experiences are situated, and aesthetic sensibilities are not immune from ideological steering and therefore not a reliable basis upon which to build diagnoses. Thus, Habermas's reservations with aesthetic experience point to the central problems explored in this chapter. Habermas's contribution to this is the broader processes of socialisation. Persons will interpret the content of aesthetic disclosure differently as the experience is refracted through each person's expectations and foreknowledge.

As I argue throughout this chapter, recognising that aesthetic sensibilities are situated does not require us to (as is all reasoning), reject the contribution of disclosive experience. Rather, this observation requires us to acknowledge that art's disclosive power is not reflexively sufficient and must operate alongside other aspects of reflexive practice. The problem is that Habermas limits the input of a reflexive learning process to only those sharable and justifiable actions in rational argument. What is reflexively valuable about aesthetic experience is the opportunity disclosure affords to a critic to re-evaluate their experiences. The solution need not be a return to early Critical Theory that invested so many hopes in aesthetics. The aesthetic realm can be shown to have valuable reflexive possibilities, capable of subverting our experience of the world without inflating its reflexive significance. When the aesthetic experience is understood as a 'diagnostic tool', aiding the process of recalibration that occurs when processing an aesthetic experience, then such experiences also establish how the experience fits into our expectations and existing perception of the world. A push back to Habermas does not dispute the situated nature of disclosure, but does defend the contribution of aesthetics to provoking disclosure experiences that are so provocative that they stimulate an occasion of reflexive practice.

In this section, I have presented the two attitudes towards the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience in Critical Theory. While the early Critical Theorists believed aesthetic experience operated as a form of ideology critique and unsettled a person's outlook, Habermas disputed the validity of such disclosive experiences and even considered they created reflexive risks. I now delve deeper into these reflexive risks and consider the relation between racialisation and aesthetic experience, outlining how disclosure is experienced by agents in different social locations.

## II. AESTHETICS AND RACIALISATION

Aesthetic experience's reflexive appeal for certain Critical Theorists is that specific artworks disclose the social world in new ways. But when the formation of aesthetic sensibilities is overlooked, the complex ways in which ideology can permeate our aesthetic experiences are ignored. When this happens, a Critical Theory fails to see how disclosures can also derail responsible reflexive practice. A responsible account of aesthetic reflexivity would therefore recognise that aesthetic sensibilities are not immune to the broader processes of socialisation which influence factors such as interpretation or salience central to aesthetic experiences. In this section, I outline the situated nature of aesthetic experiences. I use racialisation to address one of the ideological contexts in which disclosure takes place in order to show that responsible reflexive practice demands that the critic acknowledges the biases that influence and frame the aesthetic experience.

So far, this dissertation has focused on the obstacles raised by structural racism to reflexive practice. Racialisation is an ideological component of structural racism. It is one process by which human bodies are ascribed meaning on account of their

perceived identities. The theorist Cedric J. Robinson describes this process – which he terms *racialism* – as the ordering of groups on the basis of falsified 'natural' distinctions, which justify relations and hierarchies that emerge between groups.[30] Racialisation forms a discourse whereby cultural expectations and prejudices are anchored in the body that stabilises inequalities through visual hierarchies of signification rooted in structures and historical practices. These then ground and justify racially discriminatory practices in the public imagination. Crucial to the context of racialisation is the hierarchy in which these bodily markers are viewed. They become embodied place-holders of privilege, 'visible as surface phenomena, and determinant of economic and political status.'[31] Racialisation thereby forms an ideological pillar of structural racism that entrenches distinctions between persons on the basis of race. These racial social imaginaries play a significant role in dominant aesthetic frameworks that must be acknowledged in reflexive practice.

Consider the racial discourse surrounding Black women in the ninetieth-century French social imagination. As historian Robin Mitchell describes, Black women were represented 'as savage[s], hypersexual, and above all an existential threat to the purity of the French nation.'[32] This narrative associating Black women with hypersexuality is epitomised through figures such as Sarah Baartmaan, the 'Hottentot Venus'.[33] Baartman is a historical example of how racialisation operates as social imaginary rather than – or as well as discourse – whereby meanings and aesthetic sensibilities are grounded in the perception of others. Baartman, or her body, became an object of fascination among white European audiences before and after her death in 1815. As

[30] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition,* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 2

[31] Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 102

[32] Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France,* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2020), 9

[33] Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture,* (London: Routledge, 2018), 100

art historian Janice Hobson describes, Baartman came to represent 'connections between grotesquerie, animalism, and hypersexuality.'[34] She was a Khoisan first-nations woman born in (modern-day) South Africa in 1789 and suffered from steatopygia, which causes muscle inflammation in the thighs and buttocks. During her short life, Baartman became the maid of 'Dutch showman' Hendrik Cezare in Cape Town. Cezare took Baartman to London and by 1810 was exhibiting as 'the Hottentot Venus', a name that combined a slur on Khoisan people with the ironic imagery of the 'goddess' of beauty. In 1814, Baartman was sold to an animal trader in Paris, where her presence in 'freak shows' inspired a vaudeville play that 'mocked French male attraction to Baartman and advocated the "superior" value of French women.'[35] The discourse of the Hottentot Venus was juxtaposed with a discourse of Frenchness by which the purity and superiority of (White) French women were reinforced.

Baartman's body fed a form of scientific racialisation that promoted aspects of her body, such as her genitalia. The cultural associations of sexual degeneracy, which could then be 'justified' as a physical manifestation of her subordinate, colonial position, could in turn find justification in her "inappropriate sexuality, feminine aggressiveness, and excess.'[36] In 1815, Baartman underwent three days of examination by French zoologists, anatomists, and naturalists.[37] One of the examiners was the French anatomist Georges Cuvier. When Baartman died later that year, aged twenty-six, Cuvier gained access to her body. Cuvier performed an autopsy and even preserved her genitals in formaldehyde, which were then available to be consumed by the public gaze into the Twentieth Century. Racialisation, therefore, becomes essential in

[34] Ibid, 22
[35] Ibid, 43
[36] Mitchell, 57-8
[37] Hobson, 2018, 45

evaluating the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience because of its influence – in ways such as these – on situated seeing.

A reflexively responsible account of aesthetic experience needs to acknowledge the situated position of those experiencing disclosure, since aesthetic values play a significant role in the everyday processes of racialisation, and they manifest in prejudiced sensory habits.[38] Monique Roelof's work on critical race aesthetics demonstrates this precise point. She describes the dialectical process whereby aesthetic perception and discourses of race reinforce one another. Thus, the visible aspects to racialisation take on aesthetic baggage through hierarchies of beauty, whilst at the same time, the connection between aesthetics and racialisation demonstrates that racial discourses often ground our experiences of viewing works of art. The interaction between oppression and aesthetics illustrates one of the risks that Critical Theorists expose themselves to when they appeal to aesthetic disclosure for reflexive insight. The triggers that stimulate disclosure are not neutral, nor are those who have aesthetic experiences insulated from society, but both emerge from collective pools of understandings and interpretations. But in turn, broader social categories influence our aesthetic perceptions and evaluations.[39]

The connection between racialisation and situated seeing can be seen in the reception of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) at the Paris Salon in 1865. The Salon had been the official exhibition by the Académie des Beaux-Arts since 1725 and was the foremost institution of aesthetic taste in France. Yet, the painting *Olympia* is straightforward enough: in the foreground lays a naked White lady looking at the viewer whilst a young Black woman brings her flowers in the background. The painting's effect on the audience was explosive. The onlookers were not unsettled

[38] Monique Roelof, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic,* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 49
[39] Ibid, 95

simply by the exposed body of the painting's central figure, the model Victorine Meurent. The nude character was a fixture of Western portraiture and intended to provoke disinterested appreciation; nudes were not images to slaver over.[40] But, while Manet painted Meurent in the style of the *nude*, the perceived pornography of the painting meant that she appeared *naked* to the audience.[41] Manet's painting was 'an affront' to the classical tradition due to the sexual character of Meruent's nakedness.[42] It was a dirty picture. Manet's disruption of the nude tradition was a historical moment of artistic significance and was achieved by drawing attention to the social imaginaries and representations that circulated amongst Salon goers around nineteenth-century Paris. Manet shocked audiences in part because Meurent's bold and knowing gaze replicated the photographic business cards of courtesans and would have resonated with its contemporary audience.[43] To confirm his audience's suspicions, Manet then chose a popular pseudonym for prostitutes as his title: *Olympia*.[44]

More often overlooked in accounts of *Olympia* is how important racialisation was in producing *Olympia's* disclosures. Manet played on contemporary French discourses on race, which tied sexual deviancy to Black female bodies. As Mitchell's historical work has demonstrated, there was a 'cultural use of black women to depict issues such as prostitution or illegitimacy.'[45] Most discussion of the painting has focused on the educative intention of Manet's painting on the connection between courtesans and class struggle.[46] T. J. Clarke pointed to the painting's critique of capitalism. He

[40] T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 130

[41] Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism,* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 75

[42] Richard Leppert, *The Nude: The Cultural Rhetoric of the Body in the Art of Western Modernity,* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 176

[43] Nehamas, 2017, 116

[44] Clark, 1986, 116

[45] Mitchell, 2020, 54

[46] Ibid, 86

suggested 'that nakedness is a strong sign of class, a dangerous instance of it,'[47] which evokes '[t]he images of sickness, death, depravity, and dirt.'[48] While this is all true, it implies that the sexual character of Meruent's nakedness arises exclusively from her White skin. Conclusions such as Clarke's risk distracting us from the painting's aesthetic use of race in the production of our social meanings. In turn, they draw the viewer's attention away from the painting to overlook the role played by the other figure, the maid, whom we know only as Laurie.



Laurie is fully dressed in traditional (pure) white robes, bringing her mistress a bouquet. Yet the image of this decorously dressed maid is used to sexualise her mistress's White body. Manet achieves a great deal of the shocking impact of *Olympia* because Laurie is Black. She was a Black woman in the nineteenth-century France and her presence on the canvas would have resonated with the racialised discourse that had surrounded Sarah Baartman fifty years previously.[49] France was a country whose national identity was being reshaped in the wake of the Haitian Revolution; part of

[47] Ibid, 113
[48] Ibid, 146
[49] Hobson, 2018, 100

that reshaping consisted in seeing other races – such as their colonised overthrowers – as alien and dangerous. The theorist bell hooks remind us that these racial imaginaries played out in art, describing how 'Painters exploring race in the 19th Century often created images contrasting white female bodies with black ones in ways that reinforce the *greater value of the white female icon*.'[50]

Manet, therefore, played on the Salon-goers' cultural associations of Black servants, by placing Laurie's racialised body alongside Meurent, so as to sexualise the latter's appearance. As Sander Gilman notes, 'One of the black servant's central functions in the visual arts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to sexualise the society in which he or she is found.'[51] Manet deploys the tradition of European portraiture in which Black bodies are pictured next to white bodies as either a *contrast* or as a bad influence,[52] and her presence is significant in achieving Manet's transition from *nude* to *nakedness,* owes much to the presence of Laurie.[53] Studying Manet's *Olympia*, therefore, explains the role of aesthetics in racialisation and illuminates discussions of disclosure and aesthetic reflexivity. If '*Olympia* transgresses against the cultural naturalisation of the nude in the history of Western painting,'[54] racialisation discloses the broader social forces that explain how Manet's appeal to Laurie produces the outraged reaction in the Salon. It shows how existing aesthetic values can play a structuring role in the production and stabilisation of the second-order obstacles that reflexive critique must confront.

The reflexivity of aesthetic experiences resides in the way they intervene in our feedback loops and unsettle our habitual experience of the world. Still, aesthetic

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[50] bell hooks, 'Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace' in, *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 61-78, 64

[51] Sander L. Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Ninteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature' in, *Critical Inquiry,* (Vol. 12: No. 1, 1985), 204-42, 209

[52] Ibid

[53] Ibid

[54] Leppert, 146

experiences are framed by second-order aesthetic schemas that the reflexive contributions of aesthetics will be undermined if the situated experience of the disclosure is not scrutinised. If *Olympia* highlights that our aesthetic values are not autonomous, but potentially complicit in supporting this very racialisation, then this hermeneutic aspect of racialisation can distract critical activity from what should be the core of reflexive practice, focusing on the ways in which social schemas obstruct our capacity for self-understanding.

In this section, I have argued that the disclosures stimulated by artworks are not autonomous from ideological influence, such as racialisation. Instead, these discourses play an essential role in how one experiences aesthetic disclosure. Some theorists fetishise artworks and romanticise the idea of disclosive force. Critical Theory must be wary of doing this because, while artworks can be subversive, since they are as part of dominant social imaginaries, artworks can also reinforce the status quo. In the following two sections, I establish that the Hegelian and Kantian approaches to aesthetics in Critical Theory overlook this important situated dimension to aesthetic experience. By illustrating how each approach fails to engage with these reflexive risks, I reveal how the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience can produce irresponsible critique.

## III. FIRST MODEL: ADORNO AND BAKER

The first aesthetic model I consider is the Hegelian one laid out by Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno's model is the most rigorous – and opaque – investigation into the reflexive potential of aesthetic experience in Critical Theory. Adorno does not think we achieve reflexive insight by 'thinking aesthetically'. His argument is more ambitious, and he believes specific authentic artworks express the actual structure of experience

that has been 'excised from thinking.'[55] Through aesthetic analysis of these works, audiences can begin to understand their society better. Thus, Adorno believes aesthetic reflection can make a reflexive contribution to Critical Theory because it is an activity through which 'the untruth of the social situation comes to light.'[56]

Unfortunately, Adorno's narrow understanding of what qualifies as 'authentic' art promotes reflexively irresponsible outcomes. Using his notorious critique of jazz, I will show how Adorno's qualification of authentic art fails to consider how the hierarchy of aesthetic tradition is bound up in – and reinforce – histories of racialisation and oppression. In the example of Adorno's critique of jazz, this framework risks reinforcing racialised attitudes that undermine Critical Theory's emancipatory ambitions since it dismisses large sections of artistic expression as incapable of disclosing something about the oppressive nature of society.

To engage with the reflexive nature of the artwork, Adorno demands that we reorientate our understanding of aesthetics away from questions of taste and towards questions of truth.[57] Aesthetics has often been associated with taste insofar as the observer's aesthetic impressions have long been considered 'the final authority on the nature and quality of the work of art.'[58] Adorno views this understanding of aesthetics as reflexively irresponsible in two respects. Firstly, the metric of taste is liable to the manipulation of the market since it is centred upon those feelings that a work of art arouses in the observer.[59] It is an irresponsible reflexive approach to aesthetics because, in Adorno's view, most audiences fail to acknowledge how capitalist social relations

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[55] Ibid

[56] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor), (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 310

[57] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Lecture Eighteen' in, *Aesthetics: 1958/59* (ed. Eberhard Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban), (Cambridge, Polity, 2018e), 177-86, 177

[58] Ibid

[59] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Lecture Seventeen' in, *Aesthetics: 1958/59* (ed. Eberhard Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban), (Cambridge, Polity, 2018d), 167-76, 167

manipulate their tastes. We, therefore, ignore how capitalism motivates artistic practice from a form of creative and oppositional expression to yet another aspect of the social world that can be co-opted and industrialised.[60]

Secondly, Adorno believes an aesthetic framework rooted in taste is reflexively irresponsible because it misrepresents the nature of the artworks, and by extension, its reflexive possibilities. Adorno asserts that aesthetics is tied to questions of truth rather than taste, and he relies on a Hegelian understanding of aesthetics to articulate this view.[61] For G. W. F. Hegel, art is tied to forms of self-understanding *and* an understanding of our social-historical condition.[62] A Hegelian approach to aesthetic analysis, therefore, focuses on 'truth' so as to establish how artworks might reveal something about this social world. Adorno adapts this framework to argue that aesthetic experience promotes a more reflexive attitude to experience that unsettles our confidence in our understanding of the world.[63] Adorno believes artworks offer such reflexive insight because they are repositories of social material, capable of expressing the social conditions in which they were created. Adorno believes the social baggage of artworks is made explicit in the process of composition. He identifies a dialectical relation between the techniques used by the artist and the object of *material*.[64] Material refers to the tradition of artistic production in which the artist stands and consists of the pre-formed expectations that accumulate due to previous compositional activity.[65] The material of music, for example, would be the 'tonal

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[60] Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited,* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 81

[61] Adorno, 2018e, 177

[62] Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism,* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 51

[63] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Lecture Twelve' in, *Aesthetics: 1958/59* (ed. Eberhart Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban), (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018c), 116-25, 123

[64] Raymond Geuss, "Form and 'the New' in Adorno's *'Vers une musique informelle"* in, *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 140-66, 149

[65] Raymond Geuss, 'Adorno and Berg' in, *The Cambridge Companion to Berg* (ed. Anthony Pople), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 38-50, 40

schemata, formal types, genres, compositional techniques, tuning systems and styles of performance.'[66] The material presents the artist with a set of 'aesthetico-logical possibilities,'[67] which Adorno terms *techniques*.[68]

Adorno believes that only artworks that can convey the contradictions of the social world are 'authentic'. Artworks which fall short of this threshold are considered to *affirm* the conditions of oppressive societies, whether they intend to or not.[69] An artwork, for Adorno, is authentic not because of its content but due to its *form*. Authentic artworks offer resistance against the prevailing structures of reason through their composition due to the composition's resistance to the normative expectations that make up a material's tradition.[70] Thus, only these 'authentic' artworks contain reflexive possibilities.

Consider an artwork which Adorno holds to be authentic, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Adorno describes how 'this painting firmly negate[s] empirical reality, destroy[s] the destroyer, that which merely exists and, by merely existing, endlessly reiterates guilt.'[71] The painting is a successful expression of brutality because Picasso's production is an authentic articulation of the social content sedimented in the material: Adorno believes that *Guernica* 'achieves a level of expression that sharpens it to social protest beyond all contemplative misunderstanding' precisely because of its inhuman construction.[72]

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[66] Max Paddison, 'The Language-Character of Music: Some Motifs in Adorno' in, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association,* (Vol. 116: No. 2, 1991), 267-79, 274

[67] Owen Hulatt, 'Critique Through Autonomy: On Monads and Mediation in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory'* in, *Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy* (ed. Owen Hulatt), (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 179-96, 188

[68] Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music* (trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor), (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 31

[69] Adorno, 1998, 130

[70] Ibid, 310

[71] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Commitment' (trans. Francis McDonagh) in, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics,* (London: Verso, 1980), 177-95, 190

[72] Adorno, 1998, 310



The painting is a cubist depiction of the German 'blitzkrieg' aerial bombing of Guernica, which took place on 26th April 1937. The unrestrained and mechanical destruction of blitzkrieg tactics, coupled with the rise of European fascism in the 1930s, was a further example of how oppressive societies could no longer be reconstructed and represented as something immediately accessible. By virtue of its symbolism, *Guernica* provided a genuine shock to its first audience at the Paris Internal Exposition in 1937, effectively dislocating the audience from certain conditions of responding to art as second nature. Adorno would argue that such shock and dislocation could not have been achieved by using traditional, realistic techniques.[73] Adorno is convinced that one could not paint *Guernica* as a piece of realism without it seeming clichéd and false.[74] Through his cubist technique, Picasso, therefore,

[73] Adorno believes fetish character motivates authentic art's struggle for autonomy against tradition because 'art is being subsumed by social standards of value' and must try to differentiate themselves it (See: Owen Hulatt, 'Hegel, Danto, Adorno, and the End and After of Art' in, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, (Vol. 24: No. 4, 2016), 1-22, 15). Only twenty years after Adorno's words, Arthur Danto describes the pacification of what was radical about Picasso's painting: its reproduction ornaments a kitchen under which 'soufflés were concocted for bright and brittle guests who, no more than the hostess, realised that gutted animals and screaming voters agonised above the formica.' (See: Arthur Danto, 'The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art' in, *Grant Street*, (Vol. 4: No. 3, 1985), 171-89, 175). Danto's observations highlight both what was shocking and resistant about *Guernica* and how it has since been pacified and absorbed by the status quo. The painting has developed such a familiarity that its fetish character has developed and muted its oppositional character. Danto's observations offer graphic support to Adorno's belief that as the market becomes more capable 'of turning aesthetic features into economically valuable features, art is forced to increasingly negate more and more of itself.' (Hulatt, 2016, 16).

[74] Adorno, 2006, 32

confronted traditional forms of representation, such as realism, as an outmoded artistic technique and presented the material authentically.

Adorno's hope in the reflexive possibilities of artworks is not reduced to an exercise in artistic composition. Instead, it is that composition that reveals the reflexive nature of the artwork. Therefore, at the core of Adorno's investment in aesthetics is a belief that certain works of art could provoke a 'mimetic relation' between the viewer and the world. While the Greek root of mimesis, *mimeisthai*, means 'to imitate', since Walter Benjamin's work on the mimetic aspects of translation in the early 1920s, the concept of mimesis had been used by Critical Theorists to capture a relation of intense proximity and intimacy.[75] Adorno believes the proximity produced by a mimetic impulse to be the closest we can get to experiencing a 'relation of particular to particular' and thus gives artworks their disclosive and emancipatory possibility.[76] In authentic composition of the material, Adorno believes art establishes a mimetic relation to the social world, which contains reflexive insight disclosing those 'non-identical' aspects hidden by ideology. In his Frankfurt lectures on aesthetics, delivered between 1958/59, Adorno pronounced that while mimesis contains an element of imitation, it is:

> [N]ot as an imitation of something, but as an imitative impulse, an impulse of mimicry—the impulse to turn oneself into the object one is facing or to turn that object into oneself.[77]

[75] See: Walter Benjamin, 'The Translator's Task' (trans. Steven Rendall) in, *TRR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction,* (Vol. 10: No. 2, 1997), 151-65

[76] J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 159

[77] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Lecture Four in, *Aesthetics: 1958/59* (ed. Eberhart Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban), (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018a), 33-42

By turning an object 'into oneself' through mimetic representation, Adorno believes an object is represented in a manner that provokes 'into indictment.'[78] The relation between artistic material and techniques – what Adorno terms 'artistic form' – embodies a mimetic relation to the conditions in which they were produced, presenting us with a valid disclosure of the suffering that goes unheard within systems of domination, such as in Picasso's *Guernica*.[79]

The reflexive insight of art can only contribute to Critical Theory with the second part of aesthetic experience. Adorno believes artworks, therefore, require philosophical interpretation through an investigation into an artwork's construction in order that their knowledge be presented.[80] Artworks cannot present their knowledge directly since art's mode of articulation is necessarily enigmatic as it 'relies on images, sounds, and colours rather than the clarity of discursive argument.'[81] As repositories of social material which achieve 'total enlightenment in themselves,'[82] Adorno believes that reflection on their artistic construction can unsettle expectations of the social world and enable us to recognise the social contradictions that have been 'excised from thinking.'[83] The experience of authentic art's mimetic impulse disrupts the fetishized experience of the world by expressing the contradictions of capitalist societies. Through this, aesthetic disclosures demonstrate that these conditions are not natural and are open to change.[84] Authentic artworks, therefore, offer emancipatory hopes, a *promesse du bonheur*, which Adorno reads as 'imply[ing] that art does its part for existence

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[78] Marcuse, 1978, 45

[79] Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 117

[80] Paddison, 1991, 275

[81] Richard Wolin, 'Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno's Aesthetic Theory' in, *Representations,* (Vol. 32, 1990), 33-49, 39

[82] Adorno, 2006, 16

[83] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Lecture One' in, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966* (trans. Rodney Livingstone), (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 1-11, 6

[84] Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 'Aesthetic Theory's Mimesis of Walter Benjamin' in, *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (eds. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart), (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 55-91, 76

by accentuating what in it prefigures utopia.'[85] But it does so negatively by disclosing suffering.

The reflexive possibilities Adorno assigns to aesthetic experience are to be understood within the broader ambitions he sets for Critical Theory. Adorno considers Critical Theory as directed to bringing attention to the ways that capitalist societies produce forms of human suffering. He writes:

> The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed.[86]

The need to express suffering is so crucial for Adorno because he believes capitalism is sustained by diminishing the quality of human life.

But suffering becomes diagnostically important for Adorno in a further sense. In Adorno's view, one symptom of capitalist society is a reduced ability of persons to express or acknowledge forms of suffering. Adorno considers that until things go drastically wrong, as so horrifically in the Holocaust, the sufferings and contradictions of society remain primarily unnoticed by large portions of the population. Persons are numbed to this 'most subjective experience' of suffereing.[87] Adorno, therefore, sets the diagnostic task of critique, as identifying suppressed experiences of suffering, with the hope that bringing these experiences to light and allowing suffering to be expressed will enable them to be heard.[88]

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[85] Adorno, 1998, 393

[86] Theodor. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (trans. E. B. Ashton), (New York, Y: Continuum, 1973), 17-8

[87] Theodor. W. Adorno, 'Lecture Nineteen' in, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965* (ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone), (Cambridge, Polity, 2006), 177-86, 178

[88] Adorno, 1975, 45

Adorno believes that the reduced capacity for human experience is illustrated in the quality of aesthetic experience. Under modern capitalism, Adorno argues that active engagement with artworks has regressed, such that listeners become more distant from the particularity of artworks and disengage from the production necessary to create or perform it.[89] In Adorno's mind, the increased passivity of musical consumption has detrimental effects on the reflexive potential of aesthetic experiences since it reduces an audience's critical engagement with the process of exchange and distribution required for their consumption.[90] Audiences begin to ignore art's fetish character, which conceals the labour necessary for their production and their exchange-value as commodities.[91] Rather than acknowledge the ideological character of art, Adorno fears that most audiences fall prey to its fetish character, assuming an uncritical engagement whereby 'the work [of art] transcend[s] the spell of the reality principle as something spiritual' as opposed to something manufactured.[92] Adorno suggests that in this way, the fetish character of (inauthentic) art can make an essential contribution to stabilising the numbing of subjective experience as well as to the illusion of spiritual and material satisfaction provided by the capitalist society.

Adorno thinks we can keep these increasingly integrative and pacifying conditions of capitalist society at bay through a two-stage form of reflexive practice. First, the critic must acknowledge the ways in which subjective experience is socially and historically mediated[93] and, consequently, vulnerable to the damaging effects of

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[89] Theodor W. Adorno, 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' in, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (ed. J. M. Bernstein), (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 29-60, 35

[90] Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 64

[91] Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno,* (London: Verso, 2014), 150

[92] Adorno, 1998, 341

[93] Brian O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 48

prevailing paradigms of thought.[94] Therefore, Adorno finds reflexively irresponsible a 'subjectivist' epistemology that forgets its mediation with the object and believes that thinking to have come 'first'.[95] The subject can only break the spell of ideology by giving primacy to the influence of material conditions on individuals.[96]

Second, the critic has to establish a perspective on the social world that acknowledges that society is understood to exist, not '*with* contradictions or *despite* its contradictions, but *by virtue of* its contradictions.'[97] Adorno considers that if something exists 'by virtue' of its contradictions, then the critic's diagnoses will misrepresent the situation under analysis if they try to synthesise its contents under a totalising structure. Diagnostically, Adorno warns critics that social truths cannot 'be obtained directly, as something positive.'[98] In order to remain attuned to the complexity of capitalist social relations, the critic must acquire a sceptical attitude to their changing interactions rather than assuming she can contain this multiplicity under a single perspective.[99] In Adorno's lexicon, this entails thinking in 'constellations' – associated with Adorno's project of 'negative dialectics' – and he describes the resulting method of social analysis through the metaphor of a lock-pick who 'circles the concept it would like to unseal, in the hope that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a constellation of numbers.'[100] In Adorno's view, what is required is a mode of reflection that reconstructs the social

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[94] Bernstein, 2001, 111

[95] Jarvis, 1998, 102

[96] Jürgen Habermas, 'Theodor Adorno: The Primal History of Subjectivity—Self-Affirmation Gone Wild' in, *Philosophical-Political Profiles* (trans. Frederick G. Lawrence), (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 99-109, 106

[97] Adorno, 2012, 6

[98] Adorno, 1973, 158

[99] James Gordon Finlayson, 'On Not Being Silent in the Darkness: Adorno's Singular Apophaticism' in, *Harvard Theological Review,* (Vol. 105: No. 1, 2012), 1-32, 24

[100] Ibid

conditions in which the objective of experience stands by approaching the object, whereby the critic uncovers the 'constellation' of ideas sedimented within it.[101]

Adorno's model of aesthetics presents authentic artworks as vessels for reflexive practice capable of disclosing the complexity of capitalist social relations. But Adorno's account of authentic art is so formal that it establishes an imbalance between the rich materiality of his general account of the production of the artwork and the weightlessness of the aesthetic values he considers capable of producing mimetic expression. His method encourages one to dismiss genuine expressions of suffering as inauthentic and ideological. As I now show, this is evident in Adorno's critique of jazz, which promotes a reflexively irresponsible appeal to an aesthetic experience that is not only unable to track (for example, experiences of racial injustice) but also inadvertently contributes to that injustice.[102]

Whether Adorno *should* consider jazz valuable for critique is not my concern here.[103] Instead, I show why Adorno's rejection of jazz as primitive, musically uneducated, and savage, forces us to recognise that reflexive appeals to aesthetic experience rely on frameworks that are liable to ideological distortion. This provides insight into the ways that aesthetics can produce reflexively irresponsible critique. It is also a point about how Adorno ignores real political agency and movements from below and therefore misses forms of aesthetic resistance most powerfully embodied in African-American struggles against oppression. Instead, Adorno invests the artwork with agency.

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[101] Ibid

[102] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Lecture Five' in, *Aesthetics: 1958/59* (ed. Eberhart Ortland, trans. Wieland Hoban), (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018b), 43-53, 47

[103] See: Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited,* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018)

Adorno dismisses jazz as an obstacle to reflexive understanding of society. As he describes, 'jazz does not nullify alienation, but intensifies [it].'[104] Adorno thus rejects jazz as nothing more than a commodity that fully embraces its fetishism and blunts any critical potential of aesthetic disclosure. This is because the techniques of jazz do not try to estrange listeners from the horrors of capitalism, rather, in Adorno's view, they provide pleasure by seducing them into laziness with their 'standardised rhythm[s] and standardised explosive outbursts.'[105] This point is captured cogently by Fumi Okiji, in whose view Adorno considers that jazz music 'is inextricably shackled to the demands of the market; thus, it cannot hope to achieve the critical distance necessary for independent development.'[106] Adorno's view confirms Okiji's view through his definition of jazz as a 'type of dance music,'[107] in which the music itself is only of secondary interest to its audience,[108] and simply *accompanies* the dancers and is, ultimately, simply 'incidental'.[109]

When evaluating Adorno on jazz, it must be acknowledged that he is not engaging with complex pieces by Miles Davis or John Coltrane. Adorno's definition of jazz is focused on the popularisation of jazz for White American audiences through the performances of the big bands of the 1950s and the jazz orchestras, such as Benny Goodman's. But even if Adorno is correct that some commercial mid-century 'jazz' music lacks critical insight, his justification for this conclusion encourages reflexively irresponsible frameworks in which to evaluate art. This is because Adorno's hierarchy of artworks measures the authenticity of art against a single hermeneutic – that of the European avant-garde. It results in Adorno rehearsing racist stereotypes which appeal

[104] Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Jazz' (trans. Jamie Owen Daniel) in, *Discourse*, (Vol. 12: No.1, 1989), 45-69, 48
[105] Adorno, 1989, 54
[106] Okiji, 2018, 19
[107] Adorno, 1989, 45
[108] Ibid, 53
[109] Ibid, 50

to an aesthetic of whiteness, whereby jazz is polarised as 'mechanical soullessness or a licentious decadence.'[110]

The reflexive weakness of Adorno's account is that his classification of authentic art cannot break through the race discourse that influenced aesthetics within the movements of European modernism. Adorno's attempt to define jazz situates it within the broader aesthetic trend of the primitivism of his period, namely the primitive turn of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe. Primitivism marked a moment at once a blurring and reinforcement of aesthetics and cultural anthropology with the 'discovery' of non-western objects.[111] While Adorno is careful not to deride jazz as *genuinely* primitive, he still regards it as a modern phenomenon that offers the illusion of primitive expression. On his definition, the point of jazz is to stimulate and sell this 'primitive' experience: 'the evening clothes of the gentlemen… is transfigured in jazz into something original and primitive, into 'nature."[112] But the key weakness for Adorno is the artifice of jazz that collapses so much into its fetish that it leaves no room for critical expression. It becomes a pure commodity: 'Jazz is a commodity in the strict sense' whose production can be reduced to 'its marketability."[113] In Adorno's eyes, jazz is therefore an artform epitomised by fetishism and is incapable of providing reflexive critical insight.[114]

But Adorno's template for authentic, reflexive art is rooted in whether an artwork exhibits qualities associated with a White-European aesthetic hierarchy rather than a serious engagement with a work's effort and the political struggles in which it is embedded to expose suppressed forms of social suffering. As we shall see, Adorno's

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[110] Ibid, 45

[111] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 198

[112] Ibid, 49

[113] Ibid, 48

[114] Adorno, 1989, 62

consideration of European Primitivism is reliant on his White embodied spectatorship. Consequently, he is blind to its transgressive nature and how markedly different primitivism appears in the work of artists associated with European Primitivism in jazz, such as Josephine Baker.

Josephine Baker was an African-American dancer born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1906. She captivated Parisian audiences when she debuted with the Charleston dance at the La Revue Nègre in 1925. Over the next decade, she became a global superstar, touring Europe and, with the release of *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), became the first Black woman to star in a leading motion picture film. Nevertheless, throughout Europe's capital cities, Baker 'was denounced as a 'black devil', just as, in similar language, jazz was being condemned as 'devil music' in North America.[115] Her enduring image was a development of the semi-nudity of the burlesque tradition, one that resonated with the racial ideas of the early Twentieth Century in Europe. She wore a skirt made from rubber bananas, which, being both 'exotic' and 'erect', reinforced the savage and sexual associations that drove the racialisation that underpinned European Primitivism.[116] This is captured in her biographer's, Matthew Pratt Guteri, description of Baker:

> Before Josephine Baker was twenty years old, she was a totem of primeval sex. On the high-end stages of Paris, wearing that banana skirt or a ring of pal fronds, she arched and shimmed and twisted and smiled all at once, and attending shock coursed not from her partial nudity – common in French nightclubs – but from her pitch-perfect expression of the dangerous, primitive ideal.[117]

[115] Hobson, 2018, 94

[116] Alicja Sowinska, 'Dialectics of the Banana Skirt: The Ambiguities of Josephine Baker's Self-Representation' in, *Michigan Feminist Studies,* (Vol. 19: No. 3, 2005), 51-72, 51

[117] Matthew Pratt Guteri, *Jopshehine Baker and the Rainbow Tribe,* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 2

Placing Guteri's portrayal of Baker alongside James Clifford's analysis of the period of European Primitivism reinforces Adorno's dismissal of the genre as nothing more than a fetishist – thus, reflexively valueless – a form of art. Clifford writes:

> The black body in Paris of the twenties was an ideological artefact. Archaic Africa… was sexed, gendered, and invested with 'magic' in specific ways' with 'naked form emphasising pelvis and buttocks.[118]

Clifford echoes Adorno's point that the genre bought into a fetish character by selling a pastiche of Primitivism. Rather than selling genuine primitive urges to audiences, Adorno claims they are simply repackaging contemporary feelings in a style that fulfilled the sexualised colonial fantasies of white European audiences. This point is made clear when Adorno writes, 'It is not old and repressed instincts which are freed in the form … it is new, repressed, and mutilated instincts which have stiffened into the masks of those in the distant past.'[119]

But Adorno's formal approach to authentic art prevents him from seeing how jazz can 'speak back' to racism.[120] He cannot see how different embodied forms of suffering might express this suffering in ways outside of the parameters of a European hierarchy of art. Instead, Adorno reinforces the language of European-Primitivism, whereby Baker appears at the lowest rung of the hierarchy of values as a black devil

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[118] Clifford, 1998, 198

[119] Adorno, 1989, 54

[120] It is worth bearing in mind Angela Y. Davis's work on the blues when considering the ability of art to 'speak back' and provoke resistance in ways that evade recognition by dominant groups. As Davis writes: 'Women's blues have been accused of promoting acquiescent and therefore anti-feminist response to misogynist abuse. […] Such claims do not take into account the extent to which blues meaning is manipulated and transformed – sometimes even into its opposite – I blue performance. […] In this sense, the blues genre is a direct descendant of work songs, which often relied on indirection and irony to highlight the inhumanity of slave owners so that their targets were sure to misunderstand the intended meaning.' (257). See: Angela Y. Davis, 'I Used to be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity' in, *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (eds. Angela Y. Davis and Joy James), (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 248-64

whose 'very body threatened European's 'civilisation' and her nudity and 'wild' dancing elicited outrage'[121]

Adorno does not pay enough attention to how different bodies experience different suffering and how these persons find different ways to express this suffering. Okiji captures this poignantly:

> It is safe to assume that Adorno considered the black experience wholly inconsequential to the narrative of the modern on which his culture critique rested.[122]

According to Adorno, jazz fails to subvert the dominant logic of society through the authentic work of art, which is not found in jazz. Hobson's reading of Baker provides one way of pushing back to Adorno. She reads the reception of the primitive in European societies as relying on two hermeneutic frameworks of aesthetic expression. Where in one framework, the European aesthetic tradition emphasised the 'form of the body', Hobson points to a competing (also European) framework of aesthetic expression that emphasised 'the language of the body.'[123] Thus, Hobson believes critics of Baker's performances too often overlook how the 'batty can thus function as a site of resistance, instead of reinforcing shame and self-depreciating humour.'[124] By focusing on how bodies can subvert social meanings – an insight to which Adorno's White gaze blinds him – we can see how the act of disclosure is capable of exposing existing meanings but also of subverting and producing new ones. Baker's provocative dancing can then be seen as an art of protest and affirmation of 'blackness' as more than satisfying colonial sexual fantasies.

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[121] Hobson, 2018, 94
[122] Ibid, 24
[123] Ibid, 91
[124] Ibid, 89

In this section, I have illustrated how Adorno's account of the reflexive possibilities of Hegelian aesthetic experiences engenders irresponsible diagnosis. The formal account of authentic art not only risks overlooking the expression of racial injustice but, as we have seen in Adorno's work on jazz, the view actively reinforces processes of racialisation. If aesthetic disclosures are to make a reflexive contribution to Critical Theory, then they must also place our aesthetic presuppositions and values under scrutiny. Otherwise we risk entrenching the ideological contexts that Critical Theories seek to overturn. In the next section, I turn to Alessandro Ferrara's Kantian approach to aesthetics and explain how this effort to secure the reflexive dimension of aesthetics experience promotes a different, but, nevertheless, still irresponsible, account of aesthetic reflexive practice.

## IV. SECOND MODEL: FERRARA AND WALKER

Alessandro Ferrara contends that a Kantian approach to aesthetics brings clarity to a critic's diagnoses and reinforces Critical Theory's transformative-political ambitions, since they 'illuminate new ways of transcending the limitations of what is and expanding the reach of our normative understandings.'[125] Ferrara reaches this conclusion only by radically reconfiguring Critical Theory's assumptions about the reflexive possibilities of aesthetics along Kantian lines. Ferrara believes that the rarefied reflexive possibilities associated with the imagination and forms of disclosure are not just the currency of the aesthetic. Instead, these experiences are, in fact, examples of a broader methodological paradigm of 'reflective judgment'.[126] To justify

[125] Alessandro Ferrara, *The Force of the Example: Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 3

[126] Ibid, 22

this claim, Ferrara departs from the Hegelian understanding of aesthetics that had previously guided Critical Theorists in order to defend a Kantian alternative. Having outlined Ferrara's account of reflective judgment and its relevance to discussions of aesthetic reflexivity, I demonstrate why his account relies on a reflexively irresponsible understanding of human flourishing by considering it in the context of the sculptural work of the American artist Kara Walker.

Ferrara's turn to aesthetics is an effort to achieve context-transcending claims in Critical Theory. In contrast to the Kantian accounts already discussed in this dissertation, such as Habermas's and Rainer Forst's, Ferrara seeks to defend the possibility of establishing universal normative claims *without* principles, as he believes normative principles cannot achieve universal assent under conditions of cultural pluralism. To achieve this, Ferrara moves away from Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy that guided Habermas and Forst, and, instead, draws inspiration from Kantian aesthetic work on judgment. Ferrara makes this decision as he believes that reconciliation between social pluralism and normative universalism can be achieved in ways similar to that agreement may be reached in aesthetic judgements. Combining normative claims with an aesthetic framework would thereby allow the critic to remain attuned to the particularity of the situation under analysis rather than distort it to represent an antecedent principle.



In an aesthetic judgement, we might experience something – say, the head of a horse of Selene, looted from the Parthenon in Athens and currently housed in The British Museum – as provoking a sense of beauty. While we might be able to point to features that contribute to the sculpture's sense of 'beauty', such as the droopiness of the horse's lower jaw as it flops over its pediment, this cannot be communicated by pointing to those features as necessary conditions of the sculpture's beauty. Ferrara believes that these kinds of 'aesthetic' judgements exceed our own opinion – universal claims – without an appeal to principles. Principle-led judgment – or 'determinate judgment' – proceeds by evaluating a particular situation under a general rule, such that no meaning is lost between 'a set of rules or principles' and the situation under analysis.[127] In contrast, there is something exemplary in the experience of art objects that can be communicated and recognised by others. Ferrara's point is that the transmissibility of aesthetic judgements is not deductive but is achieved through the notion of 'exemplary validity' by means of 'reflective judgments'.

[127] Ibid, 19

In reflective judgements, we begin with a particular experience and proceed to establish a more general claim.[128] The normative force of a principle is replaced by the force of 'examples', or 'exemplars', which resonate with deep-seated intuitions shared by all persons.[129] Such resonance is achieved, according to Ferrara, by producing 'singular and exceptional [moments of] *congruence*' between the descriptive (what is) and the normative (what ought to be) aspects of our social lives.[130] The exemplar is 'the element that fits best and *makes the most* of a pre-existing symbolic structure, becoming synonymous with *the most appropriate*.'[131] And so, in the example of the horse of Selene, it is a particular experience that is able to transmit a more general feeling of beauty since its qualities resonate with deep-seated ideas of classical beauty.

Forst recognises that a Critical Theory cannot appeal to exemplary validity through culturally thick exemplars, like classical beauty. A more general standard is needed, allowing us to recognise the exemplarity of a particular experience. Ferrara argues that there is 'universal capacity to sense the flourishing of human life',[132] namely, Kant's notion of a *sensus communis* – 'the common sense'. Ferrara describes how this feeling of *sensus communis* 'arouses a pleasure of which we can expect that it be universally sharable insofar as it evokes the flourishing of a human life.'[133] Exemplary experiences promote this underlying commitment to *sensus communis* since they:

> [S]omehow enable us to make sense of how a judgment that invokes no principles or concepts and addresses the potential, inherent in a given object of interpretation, for enhancing or furthering our life, can claim universality after all.[134]

[128] Ibid, 20
[129] Ibid
[130] Ibid, 3
[131] Ibid, 36
[132] Ibid, 31
[133] Ibid
[134] Ibid, 61

Ferrara believes this intuition is universal and 'relevant for all individuals living in the human condition', because, in so far as persons recognise their life as mortal,[135] they have a body with which to articulate their intentions and limitations.[136] While Ferrara concedes that cultures 'articulate this basic feeling of well-being or flourishing and stagnation in different vocabularies,' he nevertheless considers the notion of exemplarity to be capable of bridging pluralism and universalism.[137] The exemplar provokes a feeling of congruence between the *sensus communis* and, he claims, 'designates an optimal congruence of an identity with itself.'[138] Thus, it is the *sensus communis* that gives exemplarity universal reach, not the examples themselves (which would 'would presuppose a common culture encompassing the whole human species').[139]

Ferrara's turn to reflective judgment presents a very different model of aesthetics for Critical Theory to the Hegelian models proposed by earlier Critical Theorists like Adorno and Marcuse. While Ferrara is clear that 'exemplary validity [is] predicated originally, but certainly not exclusively, [as] the work of art,'[140] he argues that the kind of reflexive practice attributed to art can be found in other aspects of our social life, such as in a 'political institution, a constitutional essential, a social movement.'[141] On this basis, Ferrara moves away from accounts of aesthetics pursued by the early Frankfurt School, which saw artworks as embodying social material, or 'spirit', and issuing cognitive claims. This Hegelian account of aesthetics, which focused on the objective truth of the object, is replaced by Ferrara with a Kantian approach, whereby the subjective experience of the agent is centred. For Kant, art

[135] Ibid
[136] Ibid, 30
[137] Ibid, 60
[138] Ibid, 31
[139] Ibid, 60
[140] Ibid, 18
[141] Ibid, 22

brought a feeling of awe that reminded the agent of their finitude. The move allows the critic to take exemplary validity from the aesthetic realm and apply it to other areas of social life.[142]

Ferrara's account of exemplary validity suggests three reasons why aesthetic reflexivity can contribute to responsible reflexive practice in the tradition of Critical Theory. First, Ferrara's defence of exemplars enriches our understanding of *how* disclosure contributes to responsible reflexive practice. Disclosive experiences broaden a person's horizon of meaning in ways other than by rational argument.[143] In Ferrara's model, exemplars expand our imagination and the range of options that seem available to us, allowing persons to abstract from private conditions and circumstances, and judge 'as a member of a community' by means of *sensus communis*.[144]

Second, Ferrara's model illuminates *when* disclosure contributes to reflexive practice. Ferrara claims that congruence is a reflexive advantage for the critic as a universal since it is not appealing to truth but to 'the singular and exceptional *congruence'* (his emphasis) between our experiences and our intuitions of *sensus communis*.[145] Theorists like Lois McNay have praised Ferrara for clarifying the lexicality of reflexive practice. As McNay describes, Ferrara's accounts teaches that disclosure operates at a level prior to propositional claims, 'at the level of evaluative structures which precede and determine what is regarded as a relevant claim in the first place and what is not.'[146] Since reflective judgement, therefore, occurs at a stage of reflection prior to procedures of justification, it can hold principle-led procedures in check since they stimulate a

[142] Ibid, 23

[143] Maria Pía Lara, *The Disclosure of Politics: Struggles Over the Semantics of Secularization,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 36; McNay, 2020, 10

[144] Ferrara, 2008, 78

[145] Ibid, 3

[146] McNay, 2020, 10

transformation by their proclivity to produce distancing and destabilising effects on one's existing background assumptions.[147]

Finally, reflective judgement explains the connection between reflexive practice and Critical Theory's overarching transformative ambitions. Exemplars open new ways of seeing and provoke 'anticipatory prefigurations of reconciliation' between what is and ought to be.[148] Reflective judgment is, therefore, reflexively valuable to the critic since it brings the descriptive (what is) and the normative (what ought to be) into a 'rare fusion'.[149] Not only does this help the critic adjust their methods, it helps to keep their transformative ambitions in check due to the open character of *sensus communis*, since it is an intuition rather than a set of necessary conditions to be met.

However, the reflexive responsibility of Ferrara's model of aesthetic reflexivity is let down by an unpersuasive account of universal intuition. His account of *sensus communis* is characterised by a lack of reflexive depth occasioned by mistaking or misidentifying this intuition as universal.[150] Ferrara cannot factor in the influence of ideologies, such as racialisation, to his firm commitment to a shared form of human flourishing. His position is irresponsible because the universal reach of *sensus communis* can only be upheld if human flourishing is gutted of its social and historical baggage.[151] Once we place Ferrara's work in situated ideological contexts, such as those tied to racialisation, the irresponsibility of his reflexive proposals is made more explicit. Despite their Kantian and Hegelian differences, like Adorno's model of aesthetics, Ferrara places too much hope in the formal content of disclosive experience that relies on a culturally insensitive appeal to shared human intuition.

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147 Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory Between Past and Future,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 30

148 Ferrara, 2008, 4

149 Ibid, 3

150 McNay, 2020, 12

151 Ibid

The reflexive irresponsibility of this account of human flourishing that undergirds Ferrara's notion of *sensus communis* is illuminated when it is considered in the context of the work of American artist Kara Walker. Walker's 2014 piece, *A Subtlety,* took place within the ruins of the Domino Sugar Refinery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (United States).[152] The reference to subtlety is not a reference to the nuance of Walker's work. 'Subtitles' were small sculptures or dioramas made of sugar paste that was placed on tables at banquets for royalty. Due to the rarity of sugar in Europe before the seventeenth century, these sweet dioramas were historical symbols of power. Walker's piece consists of a white sphynx, standing seventy feet long by thirty-five feet high and depicts a hypersexualised and racialised stereotype of Black women made from polystyrene and coated in forty-five tons of sugar, surrounded by fifteen life-sized casts of Black boys carrying baskets of limbs. The work discloses the interconnected histories underpinning the colonial sugar trade. By focusing on themes of gendered exploitation and racialisation, Walker's work is a valuable means of illuminating the reflexive weaknesses in Ferrara's grasp of disclosure.

[152] The art collective, Creative Time, invited and commissioned Walker – an artist famous for her silhouette drawings depicting slavery plantations – to provide a sculpture within the Dominoe Sugar Refinery. The Sugar refinery, once the largest in the world, was to be torn down that year (2014) and replaced by expensive condos. This development marked yet another transition in gentrification of the traditional industrial district of Brooklyn, New York of Williamsburg. Such a context is significant in terms of assessing the political success of the piece. For example, did Walker contribute to gentrification? Why did she accept free sugar form Dominoes?



Walker's sculpture discloses how the production and distribution of the sweet commodity relied on intersecting oppressions, including industrial labour, capitalist global trade, gendered exploitation, and racialisation. Walker captures this in her extended – and deliberately *unsubtle* – the title of the piece:

> *A Subtlety:* or the *Marvellous Sugar Baby,* an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant.[153]

Walker's *Subtlety* is an effort to disclose the 'ugliness' that enabled this refinement process.[154] In the venue of the Domino factory, the audience experienced the Sugar Baby in a space that is a relic of the industry, which, as Walker describes, has left 'this grassy, pungent, almost nauseating sugar smell that lives in the tissue of everyone who has worked in that plant.'[155] Historically, the sugar at the Domino factory was refined: a process that removed the sugar's impurities ground it into a fine grain and bleached

[153] Kara Walker, 'Creative Time Presents Kara Walker' in, *Creative Time,* (2014), https://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/

[154] Elisabeth R. Anker, *Ugly Freedoms,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 70

[155] Kara Rooney, 'A Sonorous Subtety: Kara Walker With Kara Rooney' in, *The Brooklyn Rail,* (May 2014), https://brooklynrail.org/2014/05/art/kara-walker-with-kara-rooney

it. In an interview with Kara Rooney, Walker explains how she 'wanted to make something that would contain that sweat and labour in the histories of the totality of sugar production.'[156] As I now show, the disclosures of this history of sugar production undermine the plausibility of Ferrara's commitment to a shared intuition of human flourishing.

Ferrara's appeal to human flourishing through *sensus communis* relies on a normative standard that recognises human flourishing in the abstract. But while he claims this intuition is universal, as it appeals to all persons, it is in fact an irresponsible engagement with the category of human. Historically, such a universal category has not existed. Thus, Ferrara's nod to *sensus communis* imagines a mode of disclosive experience that delivers the audience away from the realities of racialised schemas. The irresponsibility of such a view is captured by Paul Gilroy when he writes, 'There is no raw, untrained perception swelling in the body. The sensorium has had to be educated to appreciate racial differences.'[157] As theorist Alexander Weheliye has argued, and as Walker's Sugar Baby attests to, processes of racialisation produce seemingly biological differences, which then provide a backdrop for social relations that distinguish between who can and cannot be included within the category of the human.[158] To experience the disclosures of Walker's *Subtlety* in a reflexively responsible manner would, therefore, require the theorist to recognise the processes of dehumanization that enabled the guar to be refined at the factory. This would then force the Critical Theorist to cast doubt on the plausibility of Ferrara's notion of a shared understanding of human flourishing and so too, questions the reflexive possibilities he associates with (aesthetic) reflective judgement.

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156 Rooney, 2014

157 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line,* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 42

158 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 3

This tense relationship between the restrictions to the category of human and racialisation is disclosed in Walker's figure of the stereotyped mammy and social death. The historian of slavery, Orlando Patterson, uses the term 'social death' to describe the form of 'natal alienation' that he considers to be constitutive of slavery. Social death is the process of severing a person from 'any legitimate social order.'[159] While that individual continues to participate in forms of social relations, such as familial or sexual romantic relations, they receive no recognition for their participation.[160] A socially dead person, therefore, forgoes any rights of citizenship, rights to family participation, or rights to a community or heredity since there is, as Patterson claims, an 'incapacity to make any claims of birth or to pass on such claims.'[161] The existence of social death is, therefore, a form of separation in the category of the human that undermines a commitment to a universal intuition of human flourishing.[162] This raises issues for Ferrara as it undermines the idea that *sensus communis* could be described as intuition.

We see the place of social death in the disclosures of Walker's Sugar Baby. The Sugar Baby depicts the face and sexual anatomy of a 'mammy', a stereotype of Black women in the United States,[163] that draws upon the long history of American slave women being exploited as wet nurses.[164] Theorist Christina Sharpe's engagement with large portions of Walker's oeuvre is insightful here since it situates the themes of dehumanisation in the context of Walker's work. The figure of the mammy captured the forced domestic, sexual, and maternal labour performed by enslaved women on

[159] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5

[160] Ibid, 6

[161] Ibid, 8

[162] For a concise summary of slave legislation throughout the US, see, Repressive Legislation: Slave Codes, Northern Black Laws, and Southern Black Codes Stephen Middleton

[163] Hobson, 2018, 100

[164] Emily West and R. J. Knight, 'Mother's Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South' in, *The Journal of Southern History,* (Vol. 83: No. 1, 2017), 37-68, 39

plantations in the United States and the Caribbean that was necessary for the domestic social reproduction of the plantation. This reproduction, as wet nurse, as a victim of rape, becomes significant in sexual and racial stereotypes and the category of social death since the mammy was required to perform all the maternal functions of a household whilst also being the victim of social death, having been 'denied the rights and privileged of both womanhood and motherhood.'[165] Chapter One, Section One of *The South Carolina Slave Code of 1740* (The Negro Act), for example, states that 'the offspring [are] to follow the condition of the mother: and that such slaves are chattels personal.'[166] The document states that: 'The owner of the mother has the same right in her issue, born while she belongs to him, which he has in her.'[167] The violence of this denial is captured by Sharpe when she writes: 'the big black mammy is the object of Oedipal longing within the plantation family romance[…] sucked and fucked she is the ultimate 'earth-mother' wholly submissive yet defiant.'[168] It is this history of dehumanization that Walker's sculpture expresses and subverts.

Walker's Sugar Baby discloses the violence and dehumanisation inflicted on the figure of the mammy presented through her hypersexuality exhibited for the audience's gaze. While the Sugar Baby's blank eyes evade the audience's gaze, her erect nipples confront the audience head-on, as does her exposed vulva when the Sugar Baby is viewed from behind. Historically, there is a connection in the origin of the stereotype associated with the sexual reproductive labour performed by Black women due to the demand for sugar. Not only did conditions of plantation slavery enable sexual exploitation, but the reproduction of plantation labour depended on enforced pregnancy.

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[165] Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 163

[166] John Belton O'Neall, *Negro Slave Law of Southern Carolina*, (Washington, DC: John G. Bowman, 1848), 5

[167] Ibid, 17

[168] Sharpe, 2010, 161

For Ferrara, experiencing the Sugar Baby would potentially disclose a shared sense of human flourishing. But the reflexive character of Walker's Sugar Baby undermines this possibility. It's the *lack of shared humanness* that is conveyed so powerfully by the institution. Walker's Sugar Baby illustrates the reflexive irresponsibility that underpins Ferrara's account of disclosure. Even in Ferrara's discussion of radical evil, such as genocide, which he associates with acts in the community that exceed a community's moral expectations, the disclosure is a positive reinforcement of *sensus communis*. Yet, the hope Ferrara derives from radical evil – that 'allows us to restore some kind of hope that the victims of evil will at some point be compensated for what they suffered'[169] – is undermined by the Sugar Baby. Coated in sugar, the giant 'mammy' forces the audience to engage with the historical construction of persons and how the commodity and taste relied upon the social death of slaves, who were viewed as less than human. This history ought to be a reminder for anyone invoking claims to shared humanness that the category of human has long served exclusionary purposes by providing a threshold to measure dehumanisation. Because Ferrara fails to countenance this, it is irresponsible, therefore, to appeal to this category as a universal impulse.

McNay has proposed a more reflexively responsible vision of disclosure. She reconfigures the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience so as to eschew any appeal to positive normativity, as in *sensus communis,* and, instead, appeals to negative normativity. McNay agrees with Ferrara that disclosure's reflexive contribution is providing a form of open-mindedness. But McNay challenges the affirmative character of Ferrara's account of disclosure. Disclosive critique, she claims, 'does not one-sidedly endorse collective norms,'[170] instead, the purpose of disclosures is to 'undermine the

[169] Ferrara, 2008, 97
[170] McNay, 2020, 15

cognitive distortions' by directing our attention to 'the 'hidden' or 'suppressed' forms of suffering' that are stabilising features of oppressive societies.[171]

Even if we acknowledge McNay's suggestion as reflexively more responsible, we must go further than McNay and recognise the fallibility of the object of aesthetic experience in producing disclosures. Not every artwork produces disclosure for every person who experiences it, nor is disclosure necessarily immediate or complete, since artworks and disclosures are the objects of interpretative struggle. This should give us pause before we accept the sufficiency of aesthetic reflexivity. A focus on exemplarity risks overshadowing the individual experience of disclosure and the context necessary for the work of disclosure. We have to consider to what extent, as McNay claims, disclosures necessarily occur in a stage prior to reflection within processes of justification.[172]

Walker's Sugar Baby is instructive in exploring these issues of conflicting interpretation. Experiences of the Sugar Baby show both how disclosure was not initially widespread and how successful disclosure often occurred *after* the event, by means of digital consciousness-raising through criticism. Thus, Nato Thompson, chief curator of Creative Time and commissioner of the Sugar Baby, comments on the inability of disclosures to take hold on audiences. Commenting on Walker's wordplay of 'a subtlety' and her overt use of stereotypes, he claims that 'the edge and the knife that is in work, don't hit everybody, right? Not everybody knows the complexity and takes it completely at surface value.'[173] The effects of this failure to experience – or engage with – critics widely reported the Sugar Baby's disclosure at the time. Furthermore, it became clear to anyone searching the exhibition's hashtag,

[171] Ibid, 4
[172] Ibid, 11
[173] Walker, 2014

#karawalkerdomino, that the introduction of the hashtag by Creative Time was an effort to extend the Sugar Baby's disclosures to an online audience. Cait Munro claimed 'some visitors [were] uploading photos pretending to cup its breasts or tongue its buttocks.'[174] Stephanie Watts described how she 'heard people yell "Sugar tits!"'[175] Carol Becker recalls those who 'turned art into entertainment and made obscene gestures for the camera while standing in front of, pointing to, or pretending to lick her breasts and vulva.'[176] And as Elisabeth R. Anker notes, 'This sexualised violence was re-enacted by some of the mostly white visitors to the exhibit […] They created photographs and selfies to look like they were inserting fingers into her vagina or squeezing her nipple.'[177]

These examples contribute to our understanding of aesthetic reflexivity, since the experience of the Sugar Baby did not always trigger the disclosive experiences. Instead, they came through social feedback loops on visitors' social media accounts. As Sarah Brophy has focused on in her study of the digital aspects of Walker's exhibition, the curators of Walker's installation encouraged visitors to share their experience of the exhibition via the hashtag. Brophy's work has focused on the online dimension of the spectatorship of the Sugar Baby. It describes how it is part of the process by which audiences are supposed to engage with the 'self-reflexive critique of racialised and racist image-making.'[178] Brophy highlights how many visitors to the Sugar Baby were triggered to reengage with the work, due to push-back on social media

[174] Cait Munro, 'Kara Walker's Sugar Sphinx Spawns Offensive Instagram Photos' in, *Artnet,* (May 30, 2014), https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kara-walkers-sugar-sphinx-spawns-offensive-instagram-photos-29989

[175] Stephanye Watts, 'The Audacity of No Chill: Kara Walker in the Instagram Capital' in, *Gawker,* (April 4, 2014), https://www.gawker.com/the-audacity-of-no-chill-kara-walker-in-the-instagram-1585944103

[176] Carol Becker, 'Kara Walker: The Memory of Sugar' in, Women Mobilizing Memory (eds. Ayşe Gül Altinay et al), (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019), 65-83, 77

[177] Anker, 2022, 71

[178] Sarah Brophy, 'The Stickiness of Instagram: Digital Labor and Postslavery Legacies in Kara Walker's "A Subtlety"' in, *Cultural Critique,* (Vol. 205: No. 3, 2019), 1-39, 3

to their sexualised selfies, with the Sugar Baby as a trigger. The example of the Sugar Baby presents the ongoing dialogue between the reflexive aesthetic possibilities of consciousness-raising on our transformative political effects of understanding.

This should remind us of the limits to Critical Theory's transformative ambitions. The communicability of disclosure exists alongside practical considerations. The experience of disclosure might now occur not due to any change in the art object but due to material changes/contextual considerations in the viewer's life. It is these changes which allow the exemplar to be viewed as new. To argue otherwise grants too much significance to the power of art and underplays the situated conditions of interpretation and consciousness-raising. This reinforces the inherent limitations of the reflexive possibilities of the aesthetic. The disclosures themselves are not guaranteed without a pre-existing broader political attitude such as that which guides Critical Theory. The attitude of perfectionism and meliorism that guide reflexive practice offer a politics that structures the gaze of disclosure.

I have considered Ferrara's Kantian model of aesthetic reflexivity in this section. I have shown that his distinct contribution to Critical Theory is to lead the discussion of aesthetic reflexivity away from the Hegelian focus on truth content, towards a Kantian account that focuses on the felt experience of disclosure. Through the example of Walker's Sugar Baby and the history of dehumanisation it conveys, I have challenged the foundations of Ferrara's account as irresponsible. I have pointed to the inherent limitations of the reflexive possibilities of aesthetics. Like the case of Adorno, I have used Ferrara to show how the engagement with aesthetics in Critical Theory has – albeit in different ways – romanticized aesthetic experience to the extent that they effectively remove aesthetics from the social world, and overlook its ability to reinforce ideologies.

In the final section of this chapter, I consider one last model of aesthetic reflexivity, through the work of Martin Seel. In contrast to Adorno and Ferrara, Seel presents a less ambitious account of the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience. In Seel's view, there is not a unified political character of aesthetic disclosures. Instead, what is common to aesthetic experience is the opportunity they afford individuals undergoing the experience to self-reflect. I engage with Seel's work in order to show one way in which Critical Theory can uphold the reflexive value of aesthetic experience in a reflexively responsible manner.

## V. THIRD MODEL: SEEL AND DREW

In contrast to the early Critical Theorists, Seel does not limit his understanding of aesthetics to the philosophy of art but favours a more general definition of aesthetics that extends to 'extra-artistic phenomena.'[179] Like Ferrara, Seel explores how the reflexive possibilities tied to aesthetic experience exceed our engagement with artworks. Seel believes aesthetic experiences increases our self-understanding and our awareness of our social circumstances. Seel's overall project is worthy of consideration by Critical Theory as it illustrates both the reflexive possibility and risks of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is unstable but still capable of producing disclosure. I argue that Seel's minimal account of aesthetic experience is the most fruitful in sketching out a reflexively responsible outlook.

Core to Seel's approach to aesthetics is to focus on what distinguishes aesthetic experience from other experiences. Seel believes that the human orientation determines aesthetic situations to objects, rather than by the kind of object under perception. Simply staring at Leonardo De Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503), would not, for

[179] Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* (trans. John Farrell), (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), xii

Seel, guarantee undergoing an aesthetic experience. One could be engaging with the painting, to assess whether it's a forgery or just glancing at it on Instagram. Seel's point is that aesthetic experiences describe how people orient themselves to things, 'to perceive sensoriously in a particular way,'[180] rather than the responses stimulated by those things.[181]

To perceive 'sensoriously', in Seel's view, involves two shifts in our everyday perception. First, we engage aesthetically by altering our *motivation* for seeing to view objects as 'ends-in-themselves.'[182] It marks a shift from an instrumental mode of perception, which would take our 'individual perceptions' to 'be of service to knowledge or action.'[183] In this light, Seel describes how aesthetic experience 'does not want to explore a constitution of the world; it wants to expose itself to the world's presence.'[184] This rather cryptic claim by the second shift in perception changes *how* we perceive objects. Seel believes that once we step back from viewing the word in propositional terms, of 'waiting to apprehend this or that,'[185] we allow ourselves to take on a more *open* perspective that focuses on how the world 'appears', how different parts interact in unpredictable ways. In propositional seeing, we focus on seeing something 'as something,' drawing our attention to features such as its composition, constitution, or appropriate use.[186] By contrast, if we are to orientate ourselves to 'the world's presence,' Seel believes we focus on the 'contrasts, interferences, and transitions, which defy description since they are given only in the simultaneity and frequently only in the momentariness of the pertinent instances.'[187] Rather than attune

[180] Ibid, 21
[181] Ibid
[182] Ibid, 27
[183] Ibid
[184] Ibid, 55
[185] Ibid, 29
[186] Ibid, 26
[187] Ibid, 27

itself to an object's 'fixed' aspects,[188] Seel believes 'the aesthetically perceived object shows itself in a constantly transitory state.'[189]

Seel is convinced that an aesthetic experience is a particular form of orientation to the world that encourages a reflexive attitude. In contrast to the early Frankfurt School, Seel rejects an Hegelian rendering of aesthetics that would reveal information about the world.[190] Instead, the distinguishing feature of aesthetic experiences is a difference in 'focus' that changes our perception.[191] Seel's account of aesthetic appearing is that people engage in aesthetic attitudes when they are open to an experience. He writes: 'The expression 'aesthetic object' stands here for everything we encounter in aesthetic attentiveness.'[192]

Seel's account of the reflexive possibilities of aesthetics is valuable because it explains why a reflexive attitude is essential to aesthetic experience. Seel connects the aesthetic experience to forms of self-loss, which help us to establish future relations of gain, i.e. we learn to see 'where we stand with ourselves.'[193] Seel claims that '[t]he central virtue of aesthetic sensibility consists in the capacity for finding oneself through detachment from oneself.'[194] The process of alienating ourselves is understood as a way of 'thawing' existing beliefs so that we can continually develop.[195] Seel describes the need to undergo self-alienation as a 'permanent process' in which the subject must engage'repeatedly' and 'continually.'[196] The ethic of the aesthetic connects to a form of reflexive practice:

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[188] Ibid, 48
[189] Ibid, 27
[190] Ibid, 3
[191] Ibid, 4
[192] Ibid, 56
[193] Seel, 2014, 270
[194] Ibid, 277
[195] Ibid, 278
[196] Ibid

> [A]esthetic sensibility is tied to a potential to transcend and alienate ourselves. […] It is precisely in the arts that our most important normative beliefs and attitudes – even, indeed especially, those that we took and take to be our best – are put into question.[197]

Seel conceives aesthetic experience as an orientation of openness to the object. It is an act performed to promote an experience of freedom. Rather than a rarefied experience, it is 'an essential feature of human consciousness.'[198] Aesthetic experiences are forms of reflection that enrich human experience; in Seel's words, '[a]cts of aesthetic perception can enrich the possibilities of human perception in almost all areas – and that's all.'[199] Through this, Seel believes we experience our limitations and interactions with others. While Seel's minimal construction of aesthetic experience avoids overinvestment in aesthetic experience, its lack of detail seems to raise questions about how the reflexivity engendered by aesthetic experience can connect to Critical Theory's transformative-political ambitions.

The reflexive limitations of Seel's aesthetic theory become clear when situated in a consideration of Leonardo Drew's *Number 25* (1992). *Number 25* is striking for its simplicity and its scale. The work is made from single bales of processed cotton, woven into sheets by Drew, glued into strips, and stitched into singular bales. The result was a seven-by-nine bale construction, reaching eight feet by thirteen feet.[200] The piece was exhibited in 1992 at the Thread Waxing Space in New York as part of Drew's first solo exhibition.[201] Viewers, therefore, experienced *Number 25,* as art historian Anna Arabindan-Kesson suggests, as a vast 'blank wall' or 'blank canvas' and in so doing,

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[197] Ibid, 277

[198] Seel, 2004, 17

[199] Ibid, 18

[200] Anna Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 203

[201] Michael Kimmelman, 'Art in Review: Leonardo Drew' in, *The New York Times,* (November 27, 1992)

the work offers a perfect example by which to consider aesthetic reflexivity grounded in the individuality of each viewer.[202] Drew's *Number 25* is an ideal work to compare with Seel since the work's blankness seeks to promote openness of Seel.



Constructing the work in this frame offers an apparent similarity to Drew's other works, following grid-like constructions which he has connected to the works of Pierre Mondrian. What distinguished *Number 25,* and the three other 'cotton works' it was placed alongside at the Thread Waxing Space exhibit (Numbers 23, 26, and 27),[203] is the material. Prior to these cotton works, Drew was known for visceral visions of waste, constructing grids with carcases and materials that had been artificially aged and burnt, that echoes his childhood experiences growing up in the Projects of Bridgeport, Connecticut, overlooking a dump.[204] In these earlier works, Drew's choice of material

[202] Arabindan-Kesson, 2021, 206

[203] Claudia Schmuckli, *Leonardo Drew: Existed,* (Houston, TX: Blaffer Art Museum, Univeristy of Houston, 2009), 11

[204] Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 127

situated the viewer in a contemporary experience of waste and abandonment, calling upon them to see their relation to this waste and how their experience is grounded – and constrained, grid-like – by these material experiences.

By virtue of his choice of material – cotton – Drew achieves something very different in the cotton works and brings a historical lens to work. The cotton works were influenced, Drew claims, by his trip to Senegal and to the slave ports and holdings at Gorée Island. As Claudia Schmuckli describes in the context of Drew's work, 'Over the course of three centuries, more than twenty million slaves passed through Gorée Island to the Americas.'[205] Thus, in order for *Number 25* to achieve its critical disclosure, part of this history must be presented in the viewer.

Reading Seel alongside Drew's *Number 25* raises two possiblities for understanding aesthetic reflexivity. First, we can take Seel's account to be deeply irresponsible, holding that advocating aesthetic change in the disposition of a purely open character could lead to no change at all in the viewer. This is illustrated by considering Drew once more. Similar to Walker's Sugar Baby, the experience of *Number 25* points to the ways in which the reception of meaning is anchored in the viewer's social-political relation to the works themselves. *Number 25* focuses on the relation of the viewer to the histories and processes by which – historically – certain groups are made vulnerable to death.[206] Crucially, Walker and Drew each appear to confront a history of exploitation and its influence on racialisation by constructing the work through the commodity itself (sugar and cotton). As Huey Copland draws out, Drew's piece is also 'seductive.'[207] I understand Copland to mean that the soft, untreated texture of the cotton, clean, stacked like laundry with frayed edges,

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[205] Schuckli. 2009, 12

[206] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 7

[207] Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America,* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 14

overflowing, invites us to touch it. It could be read as promoting our typical relation to cotton. Like Walker's sphynx in relation to sugar, the historical context of the commodity ruptures specific viewers' mundane relation to cotton. This soft and breathable material's sheer weight and scale becomes 'suffocating' in its evocation of slavery.[208]

But the more nuanced appearance of Drew's *Number 25,* requires more significant levels of interpretation by the audience than Walker's *A Subtlety.* As Michael Kimmelman observed in his review of Drew's 1992 exhibition in *The New York Times,* 'One of the strengths of his work is that it is not didactic.'[209] The apparent openness of Drew's work places even greater reflexive responsibilities on its audiences than Walker's. This openness is echoed in Arabindan-Kesson's reading of *Number 25:*

> In creating a sculpture that in some ways evokes the surface of a blank wall. Or a blank canvas, Drew allows viewers to project their own images onto his cotton bale while also compelling us to work through its meanings slowly and methodically. We are compelled, in other words, to look at ourselves and what we see: Who is it that we project here?[210]

Thus, the claims about racialisation, cleansed labour, and exploitation are experienced as refracted through the social location of the viewer experiencing the work.

Arabindan-Kesson reads *Number 25* through Drew's other works and his longstanding connection to waste. But in so doing, she undermines her reading of the cotton bales as a commodity: 'that symbol of cotton's status as a mobile commodity and a signifier of profit.'[211] The bales are not, as she claims, merely experienced as

[208] For different readings of 'suffocation', see: Schmuckli, 2009; Arabindan-Kesson, 2021
[209] Kimmelman, 1992
[210] Arabindan-Kesson, 2021, 206
[211] Ibid, 203

industrial 'debris'.[212] Instead, the bales of cotton also suggest an image of the possibility for future circulation. The untreated bales of cloth are waiting to be circulated in bags, t-shirts, and dresses. This possibility adds to the historical gaze that Arabindan-Kesson promotes, which she describes as: 'Less a structure of remembrance, it is one of rumination, in which the decay of its material provides an underlying fragility to the piece.'[213] It adds to our reflexive understanding of *Number 25,* since Drew's work can be said to invite a future-looking gaze, establishing a connection between past, present, and future.

Reflecting on Drew's work should lead us to question the reflexive responsibility of Seel's commitment to radical openness, that Seel associates with aesthetic experience might be considered reflexively irresponsible. The problem is that Seel captures the aspiration of reflexive practice – self-scrutiny and radical openness – without explaining how such aesthetic acts of self-scrutiny actually stimulate persons to alienating themselves from politically maleficent attitudes, such as racism. On this basis, Seel's account of aesthetic experience seems deeply irresponsible as, on an uncharitable reading, it appears to rest on the naive we will reach the correct insights by means of taking up an unguided open attitude to the work. Seel does not indicate how an attitude of openness might produce self-alienating effects that are politically valuable to the overarching transformative goals of a Critical Theory. Instead, Seel's work appears to display the irresponsibility of reducing reflexive practice to purposeless openness, a form of openness for the sake of openness. This could be considered irresponsible, as it places too much faith in the capacity of openness this to achieve reflexively accurate insights. For an artwork like Drew's or Walker's to 'speak to me' and subvert my presuppositions, it requires me to have some basic

[212] Ibid, 205
[213] Ibid, 206

understanding of the context that the work is trying to subvert; their works won't produce the desired reflexive disclosures that might unsettle my preconceptions were I to follows Seel's suggestion and allow the 'wash over me'. But for aesthetic openness to be reflexively valuable, it cannot be purposeless; it has to be set with a larger transformative ambition. Once this is done, Seel's call for openness is then seen to exist as an attitude or orientation to the world, which serves to prevent us from reinforcing conditions of injustice. While he claims that this would be an unsuccessful aesthetic experience, on an uncharitable reading of Seel, it seems questionable how persons attune themselves successfully to an aesthetic experience, especially political works of art that seek to unsettle specific viewers' firmly held political commitments, by simply allowing the work 'wash over me'.

A more charitable reading is that Seel does not close down this possibility of politically motivated disclosures, he considers such ends to occur beyond the contribution of aesthetic experience. The mode of aesthetic perception is always, Seel suggests, an end in itself and in this aspect, to be considered not merely *purposeful* actions. More likely, aesthetic actions *coincide* with purposeful actions whilst remaining ends in themselves.[214] Thus, while Seel's account of aesthetic experience is minimal, it does not foreclose the possibility that aesthetic experiences might contribute to reflexive practice. When we take Seel's proposals as a call for a more minimal understanding of the reflexive contribution of aesthetics, it offers a valuable understanding to Critical Theory. It acknowledges the reflexive possibilities within aesthetic experience by framing it in less ambitious terms. We can avoid issues of non-situated accounts of aesthetic disclosure by detaching these concerns from the aesthetic. The aesthetic has the possibility to disclose, but the contribution of aesthetics

[214] Seel, 2004, 29

must be combined with broader political orientations, which help us to make sense of the disclosures we undergo.

The image that we should conclude with is that aesthetic experience is inherently unstable and thus potentially irresponsible. To perceive aesthetic experiences as capable of fulfilling all of our reflexive aspirations produces an irresponsible account of reflexive practice that invests too much in the possibilities of aesthetics. What allows aesthetic disclosures to contribute to our ambitions of social change is that the possibility of openness is combined with broader political orientation, such as those which guide the perfectionist and melioristic ambitions of Critical Theory.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has presented the contribution of aesthetic experience to reflexive practice in Critical Theory, in an effort to show how irresponsible existing models of aesthetics have been. But I have argued that this is not justification to abandon the reflexive possibilities of aesthetic experience. Instead, Critical Theory's engagement with aesthetic experience must involve as much reflexive scrutiny as it would apply to any other aspect of situated rationality.

This is especially important given the nature of aesthetic reflexivity that I've outlined in this chapter, which, I have shown, is defined by the capacity to stimulate disclosive experiences. As shown through Duchamp's *Fountain,* the disclosive power of aesthetic experience is capable of promoting estrangement, of subverting a person's experience, such that it changes our perception our the world.[215] By exploring racialisation, I have shown how susceptible aesthetic experiences are to the wider

[215] Marcuse, 1978, 10

influences of situated rationality. Disclosive experiences are deeply unpredictable and dependent on the standpoint of the one undergoing the experience. For Critical Theory to engage with aesthetics responsibly, it must eschew the romanticisation too often extended to aesthetic experience and recognise that it cannot guarantee a responsible attunement to these ideologies by means of aesthetics alone.

Rather than identifying an account of aesthetic experience that can deal with all these issues, I have sought, through Seel, to illustrate the inherent limitations of the reflexive possibilities of aesthetics. This is not to encourage abandonment of aesthetics but to show the radical insights made possible by works of art, depend on extra-aesthetic experiences, such as consciousness-raising and political movements However, as I have explored, the recalibration of the disclosures does provide an opportunity for engaging with further reflexive tools.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## *REFLEXIVE HUMILITY*

# Chapter Five
## Reflexive Humility

This thesis has explored reflexive practice, the aspect of Critical Theory in which the theorist casts scrutiny on their thoughts and intellectual presuppositions to minimise their influence on research. A focus on reflexive practice, I have argued, provides a way of evaluating the responsibilities of Critical Theories. The previous three chapters have illustrated the weaknesses immanent to accounts of reflexive practice advanced in recent Critical Theories; I have demonstrated the limitations that result from these methodologies showing that they fail to track or accurately diagnose injustices related to racial marginalisation. These racial oversights, which undermine the transformative political ambitions of Critical Theory, display a deeper methodological problem at the heart of the accounts: a failure to contend with the implications of situated knowing, especially in its racial aspects. As a result of this profound methodological weakness, the accounts offered by recent Critical Theories should be rejected as reflexively irresponsible.

In this chapter, I argue that virtue theory, particularly the epistemic virtue of humility, offers a way of understanding to the reflexive weaknesses. By recognizing the essential – and implicit – place of humility in reflexive practice, Critical Theorists will come to see why casting an attitude of doubt upon one's method and epistemic presuppositions serves to promote forms of reflexive practice that can responsibly carry out the situated nature of diagnosis. Articulating humility as a virtue central to reflexive practice, I argue, contributes important fresh insights to our understanding of reflexivity that can help future Critical Theory practitioners acknowledge – and avoid – the reflexive weaknesses diagnosed in this dissertation.

In Section One, I look at how consideration of epistemic character changes the reflexive responsibilities of the critic. Because the effects of ideology are more profound and less cognitive than is assumed by most Critical Theorists, I argue that reflexive practice must engage with those extra-cognitive features. My framework demands two changes in current thinking about reflexive practice in Critical Theory. First, the epistemic good of 'autonomy' is shown to be insufficient to serve as the primary epistemic good of reflexive practice and must be supplemented with humility if it is to remained attuned to factors of race (amongst other situated aspects of knowing). Second, I show that engaging with epistemic character requires our reflexive practices to extend beyond second-order blockages and acknowledge the importance of first-order epistemic experience. I present these conclusions by engaging with Critical Theorist Robin Celikates's psychoanalytic-inspired account of reflexive practice. While we both articulate reflexive practice as a form of standpoint theory in which the theorist's critical aptitude is developed and improved upon, I envisage a less cognitive account of reflexive practice than offered by Celikates.

I introduce my alternative account in Section Two. Here I demonstrate how a virtue-informed approach to Critical Theory helps to explain reflexive practice's developmental character. I present virtue theory as a framework that takes a holistic approach to normative evaluation by encouraging us to reflect upon the overall disposition of an agent – their *character* – not just their discrete actions.[1] Rather than natural faculties, virtues are shown to be corrective character traits which persons cultivate and improve.[2] The effect of these virtuous character traits is to help people

[1] Roger Crisp, 'Modern Moral Philosophy and the Virtues' in, *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* (ed. Roger Crisp), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1-18, 5

[2] Julia Annas, 'Virtue Ethics' in, *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (ed. David Copp), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 515-36, 520

understand the appropriate action in a given situation.[3] Combining Critical Theory with virtue epistemology allows us to recognise the critical attitude as something 'cultivated' and improved upon through continual self-examination and reflection. Expanding on the work of Critical Theorist Amy Allen and on recent work in decolonial epistemology, I argue that we should understand reflexive practice as an activity committed to the epistemic virtue of humility; when we do so, this helps us to gain a clearer insight into what it is to perform critique more or less responsibly. Humility, as I position it within Critical Theory, is a virtue of practical epistemology that contributes a practical wisdom to Critical Theory, enabling radical self-scrutiny by the critic to perform diagnosis that makes a responsible contribution to social transformation.

In Section Three, I demonstrate why the concerns of existing Critical Theorists regarding the essentialist character of the virtues do not apply to my proposal. Humility does not derive its justification from claims about human essences, but is, instead, a pragmatic virtue that contributes to the social aspirations of a Critical Theory.

I conclude the Chapter in Section Four by presenting the implications of my virtue-focused framework for Critical Theory. This section demonstrates how our understanding of reflexive practice changes once we recognise the significance of humility. I show that any appeal to reflexivity should acknowledge the implicit commitment and that doing so invites Critical Theory to understand better its approach to the method of immanent critique. When reflexive practice acknowledges the good of humility, it pushes the theorist to engage with the situated nature of their epistemic character.

[3] Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature' in, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3-53*,* 44

Overall, this Chapter demonstrates that when Critical Theorists recognise the role played by humility in developing a critical attitude, they are placed in a better position to identify solutions to irresponsible practices of critique. Recognising humility's role gives a better understanding of the critical attitude, which, in turn, enables us to identify more responsible approaches to reflexive practice.

## I. EPISTEMIC CHARACTER

Critical Theory must rethink the role and nature of 'the critical attitude' if it is to remain responsibly attuned to situated knowing. As was established in Chapter One, Max Horkheimer proposed the critical attitude as an attitude of heightened scepticism, which 'runs counter to prevailing habits of thought.'[4] Forming the basis of reflexive practice, Horkheimer promoted the critical attitude so that Critical Theorists would 'radically question' the presuppositions they bring to their research.[5] Horkheimer considered such scrutiny to be an essential part of critique's method because, like all later Critical Theorists, he believed that researchers could not but bring their interpretations and pre-understandings to bear on the site of research.[6]

This dissertation has shown how recent accounts of reflexive practice have failed to live up to Horkheimer's formative ambitions. A common weakness which has been identified is an overly cognitive form of reflexive practice that ignores the broader effects that ideologies, like racialisation, have on our 'epistemic character'. The concept of epistemic character promotes an account of the epistemic experience that extends

[4] Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and Others), (New York, NY: Continuum, 1975), 188-243, 218

[5] Ibid, 207, 232, and 234

[6] Linda Finlay, 'Through the Looking Glass: Intersubjectivity and Hermeneutics' in, *Reflexivity: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Social Sciences* (eds. Linda Finlay and Brendan Gough), (Oxford: Blackwell Science, 2003), 105-19, 108

beyond our cognitive knowledge to factor in our overall disposition. Rather than limiting our epistemic lives to what we know, epistemic character invites us to consider the impact of our epistemic attitudes, such as whether we're lazy, diligent, or arrogant, on how we conduct ourselves as *knowers*. To recall Christopher J. Lebron's pithy description from Chapter One, our epistemic character forms the basis of 'the seat of our judgments towards others and ourselves.'[7] Extending the critical attitude from cognitive blockages to epistemic attitudes is, therefore, reflexively responsible because it allows us to recognise the full breadth of situated knowing.

Thus, a significant benefit of centring epistemic character in reflexive practice is that it gives us more insight into the holistic effects of ideology on situated knowing. One pertinent account of ideology is Sally Haslanger's. Haslanger believes that as persons are habituated into societies, they develop fluency in the cultural values of governing social practices. This enables them to interpret and understand the expectations inhering in these values.[8] In Haslanger's framework, ideologies are socialisation frameworks that have 'gone wrong', since the frameworks directing our social practices promote social injustices. Persons socialised into these frameworks, who become fluent in social practices, subsequently stabilise these injustices since they act in ways that facilitate the reproduction of the social practices.[9] But these ideological blockages are not just buttressed by cognitive errors that can be overcome with the correct knowledge. Instead, Haslanger describes ideology's grip as a broader socialisation into unjust social practices that shape our epistemic attitudes.[10] She goes beyond the assessment of theorists, such as Rahel Jaeggi, therefore, who have tied

[7] Christopher J. Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 51

[8] Sally Haslanger, 'Culture and Critique' in, *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, (Vol. 91: No.1, 2017), 149-73, 158

[9] Ibid

[10] Ibid

ideology to bad epistemic practice on the grounds that a person has 'a false interpretation of this state of affairs.'[11] Instead, for Haslanger, the reflexive oversights stabilised by such ideologies cannot be uncovered simply by scrutinising our knowledge claims since ideologies have socialised us at a deeper level of our epistemic character.

For example, if we apply Haslanger's framework to the ideological effects of 'White Supremacy', it entails that one is socialised into the benefits and associations of Whiteness as an identity following the racist legacies of European colonialism, whereby one's skin colour determines access to housing and employment.[12] The effect of this ideology is that the material, symbolic, epistemic, and conceptual privilege works to the benefit, historically, of those who *look* White or, more recently, transact in the world in ways that stabilise the White norms.[13] Patricia Hill Collins captures the reflexive risks that an ideology of Whiteness can produce on our epistemic characters when she describes how in sociological research:

> White males may take it as perfectly normal to generalise findings from studies of white males to other groups, Black women are more likely to see such a practice as problematic, as an anomaly.[14]

Hill Collins's assessment makes a distinction between social groups that suggests occupying a privileged social position in a society structured, in part, by an ideology of Whiteness will produce epistemic oversights that ignore the experiences of subordinate

[11] Rahel Jaeggi, 'Rethinking Ideology' in, *New Waves in Political Philosophy* (eds. Christopher Zurn and Boujdewijn de Bruijn), (London: Palgrave, 2009), 63-86

[12] David S. Owen, 'Toward a Critical Theory of Whiteness' in, *Philosophy & Social Criticism,* (Vol. 33: No. 2, 2007), 203-22, 206

[13] Shannon Sullivan, *White Privilege,* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 31

[14] Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought' in, *Social Problems,* (Vol. 33: No. 6, 1986), 514-32, 527

groups. This occurs not so much because of mistaken knowledge claims, instead it is due to an epistemic attitude that is perhaps rarely challenged, thus encouraging those privileged by Whiteness to become lazy, complacent, and arrogant, even in their entire conduct as knowers. Therefore, the framework of epistemic character affords us a richer insight into our position as situated knowers and into the epistemic experiences that must be factored into reflexive practice. It emphasises how varied our epistemic lives are and that our relation to an epistemic community socialises different people differently, such that dominant and subordinate members of societies will interpret our societies differently.[15] Our epistemic character and the community to which we belong potentially enhance or hinder a person's attunement to a situation.[16]

But centring the significance of epistemic character requires us to rethink the nature of Horkheimer's critical attitude, and such rethinking promotes a new understanding of a responsible reflexive practice for Critical Theory. Throughout this thesis, I have pointed to the unintended effects of reflexive oversights within the method of critique due to a methodological commitment to second-order blockages. Focusing on epistemic character enables a Critical Theory to go beyond this limited focus and engage with a broader object of analysis for reflexive practice. It also provides greater insight into transforming our epistemic character and reducing the reflexively irresponsible effects of ideologies, such as racialisation. For the critical attitude to be meaningful, it must be an attitude that takes root in the theorist's epistemic character.

Critical Theory must reject the overly cognitive picture of reflexive practice examined throughout this thesis to achieve such an expanded gaze on one's epistemic

[15] Ibid

[16] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imagination,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28

character. This requires two crucial changes to the conception of the critical attitude. First, the perfectionist goal of reflexive practice must supplement Horkheimer's epistemic commitment to 'autonomy' and 'transparency' with a strong adherence to epistemic humility. Second, the critical attitude must go beyond a strict methodological commitment to second-order blockages to include the broader experiences tied to situated knowing. As I argue, the effect of these changes is an account of reflexive practice that views the critical attitude as entailing an individual change in one's epistemic character.

I use the notion of 'cultivation' to describe this learning process by which we become reflexively attuned to our social worlds.[17] A cultivational view brings significant insight to responsible reflexive practice as it forces us to understand that the reflexive aspiration of critique requires an ongoing process of attunement and self-scrutiny. The practical aim of critique cannot be reached through a one-off occasion of unmasking the roots of social domination; the theorist's engagement with the social world is ongoing, and through reflexive practice, we 'cultivate' the critical attitude.

We can reflect on the consequences of this by considering the work of Robin Celikates. Celikates's model is relevant to our discussion because he also frames reflexive practice as a form of standpoint theory, whereby reflexive practice is understood as a repeated activity as a result of which the critic cultivates a particular

[17] The language of *cultivation* is taken from Saba Mahmood's work, *Politics of Piety* (2005). Mahmood draws upon an Aristotelian framework to explain the ethical developments of the individual. She situates her account of cultivation in her anthropological work observing the women of the *da'wa* movement, part of an Islamic revivalist movement in Egypt that sought to push back against the spread of Westernisation and secularisation in Egypt (4). Mahmood states that the mosque movement sought to 'educate ordinary Muslims in those virtues, ethical capacities, and forms of reasoning' undermined by the secular shift (4). In the *da'wa* movement, piety is understood as a manner of being and acting that *suffuses* all of one's acts to get closer to God (120). Drawing upon the work of Piere Bourdieu, Mahmood envisages cultivation occurs through an interrogation of one's habits and refashioning of new habits. This entails *cultivation*, which Mahmood describes as a cumulative process in which the 'repeated practice of orienting all acts towards securing God's pleasure [nurtures]…on one level, the ability to pray regularly and, on another level, the creation of a pious self' (126). See: Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005)

insight. Reflexive practice is a skill developed, rather than a natural capacity,[18] which is 'always in the process of becoming.'[19] As discussed in Chapter Three, standpoint is a perspective that the agent develops through an increasing attunement to her social location and the particular epistemic features that are salient to the theorist. It advocates a deeply reflexive account of consciousness-raising as it demands that the theorist not only increase their understanding of the objects of study but also scrutinise the social location from which they interpret those objects. As such, standpoint theory brings a cumulative dimension to epistemic character since scrutiny is not a singular act of reflection but a continuous interrogation of how one's social location affects one's interpretation of the world. Celikates and I agree that the developmental shape of consciousness-raising of standpoint theory is akin to the ongoing process that reflexive practice has on one's epistemic character and the formation of a critical attitude. He emphasises this point in his retrieval of the (psycho)analyst method, describing how the aim of (psycho)analysis is 'to foster the capacity for self-reflection and critique, and thus to develop the analysand's ability to take up the role of analysis or critic herself.'[20]

Despite these similarities to my developmental vision of reflexive practice, Celikates remains committed to Horkheimer's reflexive ambition of autonomy and reinforces the familiar commitment, discussed throughout this thesis, that 'we understand critical social theory […] as second-order critique.'[21] As Celikates writes, the task of Critical Theory is 'pointing out the sorts of restrictions to reflexive capacities that lead to distortions in the process of self-understanding.'[22] Celikates

[18] Robin Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding,* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), Ch 3, Epub
[19] Ibid
[20] Ibid
[21] Ibid
[22] Ibid

describes these epistemic obstacles – which he terms 'reflexivity deficits' – as those second-order obstacles that 'make it impossible or significantly less likely' for us to gain access to and to recognise first-order problems or to criticise them.[23] Thus, Celikates views Critical Theory as an effort to help oppressed groups work through structural blockages that prevent them from achieving their emancipatory aims.

Celikates's account of reflexive practice promotes autonomy as the means by which the researcher achieves personal reflexive clarity to evaluate reason and to avoid the impurity of second-order blockages. For Celikates, autonomy is the foremost perfectionist good of reflexive practice, as it is of psychoanalytic practice. From a pathological understanding of blockages, removing the sway of ideological blocks on one's epistemic character is desirable. Thus, in Celikates's Critical Theory, there is an essential connection between autonomy and second-order blockages. For Celikates, autonomy is a developmental trait – in his terms, a procedural, rather than substantive, quality.[24] He draws an analogy to Freud's account of 'interminable analysis':

> Both analysis and critique are therefore not projects that can be completed by forms of self-reflection, which […] are constitutive of our self-understanding and practices of revising it.[25]

Using the analogy of (psycho)analysis, Celikates explains that reflexive practice and its effect – autonomy – are ongoing projects. In these terms, autonomy is a quality that is 'matured,'[26] it is constantly in development.

But the procedural account of autonomy is placed under pressure when it is recognised that the circumstances against which people gain autonomy are not fixed.

[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid
[25] Ibid
[26] Ibid

Thus, since the circumstances change, as do the conditions that allow autonomy, we do not maintain or increase our *level* of autonomy. Rather, we must gain an autonomous perspective under new circumstances, thereby committing ourselves to achieve this degree of epistemic distance in each and every diagnosis. Recall that Horkheimer presents an understanding of reflexive practice through 'the critical attitude', which aims to make reason 'become transparent to itself.'[27] But transparency lacks a developmental aspect and fails to show how reflexive practice is both an engagement with one's epistemic character and productive in enacting a change in one's character. To promote a reflexive practice aimed exclusively at autonomy and transparency is thus irresponsible, as it mischaracterises the developmental nature of reflexive practice. But reflexive practice should not restrict its aim to achieving an simplified understanding of autonomy; reflexive practice needs to consider the many presuppositions on which situated knowing may be grounded.

Centring reflexive practice around autonomy also romanticises our ability to gain critical distance from our presuppositions, something that lack plausibility in the real world. This is illustrated in the context of race. The sociologist Joyce A. Ladner reflects on her study of girls growing up in the housing projects of St. Louis, Missouri (US); she describes how, as a researcher, '[t]he inability to be *objective* about analysing poverty, racism, disease, self-destruction and the gamut of problems which faced these females' is not due to prejudice or ignorance.[28] The failure 'to be a dispassionate observer' is due, instead, to the resonance of these experiences.[29] Ladner's point establishes that reflexive practice is not tied solely to autonomy but requires many other ways of negotiating one's standpoint in reflexive practice. Once we take a more

[27] Horkheimer, 1975, 207
[28] Joyce A. Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman,* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), 9
[29] Ibid

holistic understanding of epistemic experience, rooted in character rather than plain cognition, the aims of achieving autonomy from our presuppositions and freeing ourselves from our context are seen to be neither realistic nor necessarily central to reflexive practice.

Patricia Hill Collins's work adds further reason to question the reflexive sufficiency of autonomy by championing the sociological significance of the status of 'outsider-within' that Black feminists bring to the sociological method.[30] Hill Collins shows that Black women, who are outsiders within the context of academia, are marginalised and historically underrepresented[31]; they are insiders in so far as they also occupy a marginalised and oppressed social position which is itself the object of academic study, namely the position of being Black women in a racially capitalist society.[32] In such a situation, the Black female critic, Hill Collins argues, should not seek autonomy from their presuppositions; rather, those presuppositions should be placed in reflexive tension with their academic training, in which state of tension the presuppositions are productive. As Hill Collins argues:

> At its best, outsider within status seems to offer its occupants a power balance between the strengths of their sociological training and the offerings of their personal and cultural experiences. Neither is subordinated to the other. Rather, experienced reality is used as a valid source of knowledge for critiquing sociological facts and theories, while sociological thought offers new ways of seeing that experienced reality.[33]

[30] Hill Collins, 1986, 515

[31] See: Zoe Pflaeger Young et al, 'Women in the Profession: An Update on the Gendered Composition of the Discipline and Political Science Departments in the UK' in, *Political Studies Review*, (Vol. 19: No. 1, 2021), 12-36

[32] Hill Collins, 1986, 515

[33] Ibid, 529-30

Hill Collins points to the weakness in setting autonomy as the perfectionist good of reflexive practice. She highlights the constant negotiation of one's standpoint with its social location, epistemic status, and how one interprets situations. She also shows that autonomy is helpful to the extent that we gain a perspective on our views but that autonomy, from the perspective of severance, is desirable only when the presuppositions involved are pathological.

My second disagreement with Celikates's position is that, like the other Critical Theories discussed in this dissertation, his vision for reflexive practice centres on second-order blockages. As with his perfectionist goal of autonomy, Celikates' exclusive concern with second-order blockages is rooted in his psychoanalytic framework. As Celikates writes, '[w]hat binds the method of Critical Theory and psychoanalysis is the 'ability' to take up second-order perspectives.'[34] Celikates follows the tradition of Critical Theory and its epistemic engagement with ideology to outline a definite picture of what reflexive practice involves, describing reflexivity deficits as those obstacles that prevent us from even recognising problems and from criticising them. Crucially, the problems being blocked by reflexivity deficits are *second-order* problems.[35] This central place of reason operating on second-order issues in the critical attitude gives reflexive practice a cognitive emphasis:

> I propose that we understand critical social theory […] as *second-order critique,* as *meta-critique*, which aims to strengthen everyday practices of justification and critique by disclosing the social conditions for the possibility of these practices of reflection and transformation.[36]

[34] Celikates, 2018 Ch. 3, Epub
[35] Ibid
[36] Ibid

Celikates directs his focus on second-order issues because it exposes what he calls '*structural reflexivity deficits.*'[37] Celikates believes these deficits block a person's ability to gain autonomy from damaging second-order concepts, which produces blindness to first-order experiences.[38] As a result, Celikates concludes reflexive practice should focus on the blockages that 'obstruct the development and the exercise of reflexive capacities'[39] rather than address immediate (first-order) problems, such as policing.'[40] For Celikates, the sort of wrong produced through ideology is an *epistemic* wrong 'concerning the systematic blocking of reflection and critique.'[41]

The importance of Celikates's work on reflexive practice can be acknowledged by considering that our own embodied actions reinforce Whiteness as a second-order pathology. Recall that for Celikates, second-order *pathologies* are structural reflexivity deficits: 'That is to say, they impose *structural* restrictions on the reflexivity of agents.'[42] Some essential aspects of reflexive practice and racialisation are bound up in second-order considerations, such as how racialisation establishes second-order blockages due to the social construction of race, whereby a non-natural property – race – manages to become 'real'.[43] George Yancy describes the location of the problem regarding the White gaze: 'It's not about what the Black body does, but about what the white gaze sees, what it constructs.'[44] In this context, racialisation forms a relationship between visual appearance and how this appearance serves as a *marker* of a particular social location[45]:

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[37] Medina, 2013, 76

[38] Ibid

[39] Celikates, 2018 Ch. 3, Epub

[40] Ibid

[41] Ibid

[42] Ibid

[43] Sally Haslanger, 'Tracing the Sociopolitical Reality of Race' in, *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views* (eds. Joshua Glasgow, Sally Haslanger, Chike Jeffers, and Quayshawn Spencer), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4-37, 6

[44] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (2nd ed), (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), xx

[45] Haslanger, 2019, 9

> Whiteness shapes actions, social practices and dispositions, and thus constitutes a part of that 'know how' or practical knowledge that competent social actor possess.[46]

The White gaze sees the world from the standpoint of a White person or the interests of White people. When the White gaze is left unchecked, it stabilises racist society. Thus, when the White gaze sees the Black body, it is not seeing a collection of meanings that are naturally associated with that object; it is seeing a collection of manufactured meanings and values that have been projected onto the object and stabilised throughout history. Celikates account accommodates these important insights.

But Celikates's reduction of reflexive practice to engagement solely with second-order blockages underplays the importance of the relationality between the critic's analysis of the problem and the different ways the problem is experienced. Celikates overlooks how second-order blockages may hinder the self-understanding of some parts of a community, whereas the problem is entirely transparent for others. This was clear in Chapter Three's discussion of the racial differences found in the general public's interpretation of Hurricane Katrina and its connection to deeper structural disadvantages facing Black communities in the United States. In the aftermath of the disaster, those who ignored the racial dimensions of the crisis – and accepted the racialised media reporting surrounding the Louisiana Superdrome – failed to consider how local history of housing segregation and practices of redlining meant that much of New Orleans's African American and White working-class communities were located in parts of the city which they knew all too well were especially vulnerable to flooding. Here we see the shallowness of Celikates's conception of reflexive practice

[46] Owen, 2007, 206

as a strictly second-order reflection that aspires to increased self-understanding.[47] He both overplays the hand of reflexive practice and undermines its situated character.[48] As a result, his framework lacks the nuance to distinguish which parts of a community certain injustices appear as transparent and which parts of a community experienced them as second-order blockages.

Reflexivity is not just about cognitive blockages, it is not merely engaged in dealing with a second-order blockage; it also relates to first-order problems that result from our situatedness as knowers. Our epistemic character is how we act as a knower and disseminator of knowledge. Our position as knowers is more than just cognitive. It is deeply situational, for example, involving the material location we take up via institutional affiliation, educational status, or gender and race. These non-cognitive factors lead to what many social epistemologists describe as credibility deficits and credibility inflations. These credibility deficits and inflations are important both with respect to our relations to other knowers and their effect on our epistemic character. For example, the privileged position taken up by the Critical Theorists qua social movements is often based on the assumption that their opinion will be heard (by some), and due to their academic credentials, their views will receive some credibility. The ability to rest on these laurels and take a non-collaborative stance to social theorising is an evident risk facing the theorist; it is therefore necessary, as anthropologists Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly have argued, that the researcher be alive to the situational danger for academics and 'be attentive both to how power structures influence our praxis and the relational aspects of our praxis (our positionality).'[49]

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[47] Celikates, 2018 Ch. 3, Epub

[48] Ibid

[49] Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly, *Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 180

A further concern about Celikates approach is that setting out the method of critical analysis as the search for shared conceptual blockages assumes too much homogeneity in both the experiences and interpretations of problems and injustices. If the perfectionist goal of reflexive practice is positively to achieve awareness of the blockages to our attunement, we must recognise that such blockages are not exhausted by second-order analysis and that second-order blockages may be less significant for different people. The first-order issues may need to be clarified to a number of researchers. Furthermore, it is farcical to suggest that those struggling with first-hand experience of injustices also struggle to recognise the injustice being inflicted upon them. By assuming that relieving second-order blockages is of necessary importance to all subjects, the shallowness of Celikates's conception of reflexive practice is exposed.[50]

Ironically, this assumption may indicate a reflexivity deficit since it ignores the situated nature of reflexivity deficits and their relation to specific epistemic agents. A singular emphasis on second-order critique forfeits, for instance, the diagnostic tool which captures where persons stand in hierarchies of power to one another in particular situations[51]; it fails to account for how the lived experiences of individuals of forms of life are shaped by their social position along axes of privilege and disadvantage.[52] When relationality is underplayed in diagnosis, it reduces reflexive responsibility since it assumes a single or dominant perspective of interpretation, ignoring the differentiated lived experiences under investigation.

Thus, Celikates overlooks the situated and developing nature of the researcher and those with whom they collaborate. He seems to assume a homogeneity amongst

[50] Celikates, 2018, Ch. 3, Epub
[51] Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57
[52] Ibid, 59

researchers in assuming that they all need to combat the same second-order blockages. Instead, as Haslanger describes, 'we should listen to those directly affected by the practices in question because they are likely to have better access to morally relevant facts.'[53] Otherwise, our methodologies risk producing the effects observed by Hill Collins, whereby, 'Afro-American women in academia are frequently struck by the difference between their own experiences and sociological descriptions of the same phenomena.'[54]

In this section, I have engaged with the work of Celikates to introduce the transformations required by Critical Theory to make its method more responsible. It must change the perfectionist goal from fixating on autonomy and be open to the object of critique expanding from just second-order blockages. To ensure that the methods of Critical Theory is a more responsible one, the reflexive gaze of the Critical Theorist must go deeper and she must consider her own social locations and the subjects under analysis and she must consider first-order aspects of our markedly differentiated epistemic experience. Doing so puts pressure on the assumed ubiquity of second-order blockages. It undermines the assumption that we can identify generalisable second-order blockages and that these should form the bedrock of diagnoses. Such an assumption appears reflexively irresponsible since it underplays the relational aspect of knowing. To produce more responsible forms of reflexive practice, Critical Theory must change its perspective on its method, the epistemic good it promotes, and the method required to fulfil it. In the next section, I propose that an expanded reflexive gaze necessary for this task can be constructed by working in the direction of a virtue theoretical framework.

[53] Haslanger, 2017, 166
[54] Ibid, 1986, 528

## II. VIRTUE AND REFLEXIVITY

Virtue theoretical approaches attribute normative significance to the overall disposition of an agent. Rather than limiting our inquiries to whether or not we have a duty to perform specific actions, or inquiring into which action generates the greatest happiness,[55] by following a virtue theory draw attention to the manner in which an action is performed.[56] A virtue-inspired theory of reflexive practice can be articulated by following an Aristotelian account of virtue. Thus, in contrast to a Kantian, principle-led approach, what is essential for an Aristotelian virtue theory is not simply that people follow rules or values from a sense of duty but the ways in which people *inhabit* these values.[57] For example, in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests explored in Chapter Two, a virtue-theoretical approach would emphasise the insincerity of 'speaking out' to racism for the sake of appearances, such as may have occurred in social media in the 'Black-Out Tuesday' protests.[58] Because virtue approaches emphasise the manner in which actions are performed, they look to an agent's overall character. In the context of reflexive practice, when Critical Theory is framed in terms of virtue theory, then Horkheimer's 'critical attitude' is no longer an orientation *taken*

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[55] Crisp, 1996, 5

[56] Marcia L. Homiak, 'Aristotle on the Soul's Conflicts: Toward an Understanding of Virtue Ethics' in, Reclaiming *the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls* (eds. Andrews Reath, Barbara Herman, Christine M. Korsgaard), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 7-35, 1

[57] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 120

[58] For example, on June 2nd 2020, *Blackout Tuesday* took place in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests. *Blackout Tuesday* was intended as a global display of solidarity with the protests; the aim was for white persons to abstain from posting on social media for one day to create digital space to amplify vital information for protesters. It was hoped that this white *withdrawal* from social media would also decentre white voices on social media timelines. The 'blackout' soon took on a visible form with the widespread posting of black squares onto social media timelines. Instead of signally a withdrawal from a digital space, the black squares became a visible *presence* which overwhelmed social media feeds; the 'good' intentions behind the squares not only drowned out vital information which might help protesters, but undercut a core political intention of *Blackout Tuesday,* namely, decentring white voices on social media. This brief example illustrates how theorising *about* and engaging *in* projects of political solidarity cannot overlook the ethical behaviour of the actors involved in projects of solidarity, nor ignore the different responsibilities that acting in solidarity entails for different groups.

*up* by the theorist in their research; the critical attitude becomes a virtuous feature of their overall epistemic character, a feature that they cultivate as a situated knower.[59]

An Aristotelian approach to virtue conceives of virtue as an acquired excellence; character traits, like temperance, charity, and diligence, it is argued, help agents to act with practical wisdom.[60] The virtuous person has cultivated these excellences through repeated practice, forming a strong disposition.[61] As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes, practical wisdom enables one 'to read a situation, singling out what is relevant for thought and action.'[62] In the context of the critical attitude, developing practical wisdom would be expected to improve a researcher's ability to diagnose situations and scrutinise their biases and presuppositions. Acquiring virtue is is not simply adopting just a method; as a consequence of repeated performance,[63] the more one acts with a critical attitude, the more stable and reliable its effects on reflexive practice should be expected to be.[64] Thus, the Aristotelian challenges the view that we proceed towards our normative ambitions through applying principles and claims instead that we develop practical

[59] An alternative view of virtues is as a mechanism. An account of virtue as mechanism sees the epistemic virtues as dispositions which *enable* one to be a good knower.. In epistemic terms, virtues are goods that guide the activity towards the cognitive good of truth. It means that – at a mechanical level – the virtues are truth conducive, and at a dispositional level, the practice of inquiry into truth is motivated to uncover truth, recognising the responsibilities that such an endeavour entails. One such example is Teresa Bejan's account of *mere civility*. For Bejan, civility is essential to encouraging and preserving free speech and discourse. Bejan rejects the need for tolerance to produce a change in one's character ; rather, she sees the virtue of civility has serving only instrumental value which, as she describe, 'keeps the conversation going.' This presents a mechanistic account of virtue and rejects the occurrence of any change in the subject's character, the association between humility and reflexive practice necessitates such a dispositional change. Civility is akin to a skill we develop in the context of speech, as opposed to a transfromation – or cultivation – in our character. See : Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017)

[60] Annas, 2009, 520

[61] Mahmood, 2005, 136

[62] Nussbaum, 1990, 44

[63] Ibid

[64] Sarah Broadie, *Ethics With Aristotle,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 103

knowledge to *discern* the salient features of our particular situation.[65] The Aristotelian account thereby captures a change in one's relation as a knower of one's world.

Shifting the focus of reflexive practice to transforming an individual's character, it could be argued, might seem to strain its connection to Critical Theory's overall emancipatory ambitions. The telos of a virtue theory is typically understood as an *individual good,* namely the cultivation of a virtuous character. In contrast to virtue theory, Critical Theory focuses on social transformation: through critique, we seek to identify instances of oppression to reduce their social supremacy. Therefore, Critical Theory's emancipatory ambition is directed towards a *collective good*. A virtue theory framework might, therefore, appear incompatible with Critical Theory since we do not usually assume that the individual project of improving one's virtuous character is bound up with the freedom of others. Indeed, when Critical Theory calls for *collective praxis* or *collective conditions of freedom,* the intention is to break away from what Axel Honneth calls the individual aspects of freedom. He observes:

> The idea in critical theory of individual freedom being tied to a *common praxis* is held to be something *more* than simply the result of a coordination of individual interests.[66]

Honneth's understanding of individual interests is tied to actions and attitudes that are self-regarding, for example, individual interest is clearly inimical to common praxis if one were to acknowledge wealth inequality to be a problem but dismiss progressive tax schemes in order to protect one's wealth. But Honneth's concerns could only lead us to doubt the contribution of the virtues if we took the virtues to be excellences

[65] Ibid, 37

[66] Axel Honneth, 'A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory' in, *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* (ed. Fred Rush), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 336-60, 343

whose *effects* are wholly self-regarding. As the Critical theorist Maeve Cooke has described, it is important to recognise that the motivation for the critic's development is bound up with the other-regarding attitude that underpins their emancipatory ambitions:

> [C]ognitive transformation is not sought for its own sake but for the sake of the superior perceptions of society and human flourishing in which it is supposed to result. Thus, it is not a good in itself but a means of achieving one.[67]

Thus, once we see the critical attitude's effect on epistemic character is that of an individual excellence that promotes an other-regarding attitude, an epistemic virtue can be seen as an (individual) contribution to common praxis.

Epistemic virtues are traits of one's epistemic character that can be developed to make one a better knower: the agent becomes more discerning, more willing to scrutinise what they have been told, and more motivated to inquire, listen to others, and to be open to thinking about their own fallibility. As such, epistemic virtues are traits that cultivate good knowing rather than simply discrete justified beliefs.[68] They contribute to higher levels of reflection as they involve the agent evaluating their ability to navigate the world.[69]

From the perspective of epistemic virtue, while it is vital to know certain facts about racial injustices and inequality during diagnoses, such as the racial obstacles that skewer inherited wealth in the United States,[70] it is more important that individual critics develop the skills that enable them to understand the significance of these facts and be capable of interpreting similar situations and diagnose the injustices at play.

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[67] Maeve Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 13

[68] Vrinda Dalmiya *Caring to Know: Comparative Care Ethics, Feminist Epistemology, and the Mahābhāta,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 104

[69] Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 64

[70] Joe Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression,* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 19-22

Thus, a virtue theory promotes practices of 'good knowing,' of good epistemic conduct, of *wisdom,* over the mere accumulation of knowledge. The same applies to reflexive practice. The situated character of Critical Theory places temporal constraints on its findings, making it open-ended: because social conditions change, the insights we draw are not stable but must adapt to their situation, and the theorist must be willing to discard their presumptions.[71]

But if the critical attitude is to be more than an empty theoretical gesture, then it must constitute more than acknowledging the fallibility of our research. Because the researcher's epistemic characters traits are a reflexive liability, these very character traits have to be contested and become a site of change and critique. Such a perspective gets to the core of Horkheimer's development vision for the critical attitude. As Amy Allen reminds us, Horkheimer believes the critical attitude extends to 'an active and ongoing problematisation of our point of view and our belief in its cognitive and moral superiority.'[72] Thus, it should be acknowledged that the critical attitude entails an implicit commitment to virtue theory, since cultivating the critical attitude in any substantive sense involves a change in our disposition. Virtue theory thereby provides an explanation of how critics develop the epistemic tools to adapt and analyse different situations and remain attuned to the situated nature of reason. In short, virtue theory helps explain the learning process by which we develop a critical attitude.

But the question remains *which* epistemic virtue best represents the ambitions and effects of responsible reflexive practice. The rest of this chapter explains why *humility* is a crucial virtue underpinning reflexive practice.[73] Humility is shown to be a

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[71] Celikates, 2018, Ch. 3, Epub

[72] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 210

[73] The concept of epistemic humility forwarded here is distinct from other notable uses of the notion of humility in philosophy. Forst, the concept of humility is associated with the Christian tradition. However, the teachings are understood in moral rather than epistemic terms. This means that humility, for the Christian, is to be the humble person, a person to eschews themselves of the vice of 'pride' (Hildebrand,

necessary supplement to claims of epistemic autonomy in reflexive practice, since it is an attitude that acknowledges the fallible and situated nature of epistemic agents. Unlike autonomy, which simply seeks to establish some distance between the agent's second-order presuppositions and the reality of the situation under analysis, humility, in its most radical form, encourages the theorist to consider to the fullest extent how their epistemic experience affects the situation of study. It is a disposition that recognises the changing and open-ended aspects of criticism, that protects against the critic's hubris of, in Cooke's words, 'claim[ing] privileged… knowledge of truth.'[74]

7; Pinsent, 205). As Dietrich von Hildebrand described in his *XYZ,* the humble person 'is concerned with the glory, not of his own ego but of the objectively important, of that which pleases God' (Hildebrand, 18). Michael W. Austin's work captures this well. He advances a 'Christological' account of the humble person, that is, one which follows the example of Jesus Christ (Austin, 15). For Austin, as Hildebrand, this involves acting with the same 'self-lowering' that defined the life of Jesus Christ (Austin, 42). This is not a call for spinelessness or submissiveness (Pinsent, 202), rather an act of decentring of one's interests. First, due to a recognition, as Hildebrandt describes, of the 'infinite distance that separates absolute from creaturely being' (Hildebrandt, 41). And second, in favour of the needs of others (Austin, 43). This second aspect gives insight value from the Christian understanding of humility, however, is the importance of its other-regarding – or social – aspects, we act humble by acting for others rather than preoccupying ourselves with the virtue of humility. As Austin describes, 'The social or other-regarding aspect of Christian humility can be intuitively defined as a self-lowering other-centeredness' (Austin, 42). Thus, while there is certainly some connection to the Christian idea of humility, due to its focus on the moral rather than epistemic realm, I will show that radical humility, here conceived, is distinct. Crucially, there is a difference in direction. The connection between humility and reflexivity places more emphasis on the self-regarding dimension of the virtue than the Christian tradition might wish. A second use is in the Kantian tradition. The reflexive scrutiny that I envisage to be facilitated by humility is distinct from the Kantian perspective. See: Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Humility: Wellspring of Virtue,* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1997); Michael W. Austin, *Humility and Human Flourishing: A Study in Analytic Moral Theology,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Andrew Charles Pinsent, 'Aquinas on Humility and Relational Greatness' in, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility* (eds. Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch, and Alessandra Tanesini), (Oxford: Routledge, 2021), 202-211. For the Kantian, humility is understood as a necessary attitude in response to the finite capacity of human knowledge (23). Kant claims that our knowledge of the external world relies on receiving information from the external world and filtering this through fixed categories of understanding. Without the senses, aspects of the external world won't be grasped (21). Kant points to basic finitude in knowledge practices by distinguishing between the *phenomenal* aspect of entities, which persons experience and draw knowledge from, and their *noumenal* aspects, which lay beyond the experiential world. The latter is beyond the grasp of human knowledge and refers to an entity's intrinsic properties, to things-in-themselves. As the philosopher Rae Langton has argued in her account of Kantian humility, Kant advocates that humility derives from the inability to overcome our ignorance of intrinsic properties.[73] Whether we agree with Kant's specific distinction, it points to a feature in the Frankfurt School tradition and the need for humility within reflexive practice. See: Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

[74] Maeve Cooke, 'Truth in Narrative Fiction: Kafka, Adorno and Beyond', *Philosophy & Social Criticism,* (Vol. 40: No. 7, 2014), 629-43, 637

Humility is, therefore, characterised as a self-questioning and self-effacing attitude towards one's epistemic character as a whole.[75]

Allen offers a way of complementing the perfectionist reading of reflexive practice outlined in Chapter One with an account of humility. Although Allen does not look at the theoretical implications of combining Critical Theory and virtue theory, her remarks on humility provide a starting point to consider a new direction in which to conceive of reflexive practice. Allen's work on decolonising Critical Theory tells us that 'reasoning well demands a particular set of virtues,' including a willingness 'to make oneself vulnerable,' 'an openness to change,' and a 'radical openness and receptivity' to different perspectives.[76] In Allen's writing, the transformative effects of critique, of promoting relations of solidarity with the suffering of others, are made possible with the development of virtues. She describes humility as requiring an attitude of scepticism far stronger than *fallibility;* she writes that 'the virtues of humility and modesty […] are required for a genuine openness to otherness.'[77] Thus, Allen believes that responsible Critical Theory require the critic's character to undergo a degree of change, as envisioned by virtue theory. Regrettably, Allen does not go into depth about how humility, as a part of the critical attitude, encourages the theorist to recognise the limitations of her normative and epistemic claims.[78] Nevertheless, the critical attitude's implicit commitment to humility can be reconstructed by building on Allen's work and the work of decolonial epistemologists like Vrinda Dalmiya and José Medina.[79]

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[75] Medina, 2013, 5

[76] Ibid, 223

[77] Allen, 2015, 210-11

[78] Dalymiya, 21

[79] My account of humility is influenced by José Medina's work, particularly in the reflexive and political benefits we each associate with the virtue and with our general approach to virtues and character. Medina applies an Aristotelian account of virtue to his account of epistemic virtue, focussing on the aspect of learning, emphasising the need to train and engage in a 'process of socialisation' (Medina, 5). Medina focuses on virtues as dispositional benefits to agents, describing epistemic virtues as character traits that offer an

epistemic advantage to the individual and those they interact with (Medina, 30). Medina believes the virtue serves to identify one's cognitive gaps, opening the possibility of filling them. He believes humility can facilitate a learning process that improves one's overall cognitive disposition, helping us to formulate questions and cast doubt on our presuppositions (Medina, 43). Medina's engagement with humility, in particular, has been instructive to my work. Medina considers the virtue as combining humbleness and self-questioning, manifesting in an attitude towards one's epistemic character. He describes that '[a]s a testimonial virtue, my conception of open-mindedness is closely related to what Fricker calls "critical *openness*"' (Medina, 79). Furthermore, Medina (like other recent theorists of virtue) anchors his account of virtue to standpoint theory and stresses that those in privileged social locations face further ideological barriers to developing virtues (Medina, 29). He acknowledges the different starting points affecting subjects and the 'moral luck' that influences our starting point and standpoint (Medina, 53). For Medina, responsible epistemic agency involves understanding ourselves in relation to others, 'becoming aware of who one is, where one is, and where one comes from" (Medina, 53). He provides a socially situated account of reflexive responsibility, one which emphasises how variegated our epistemic lives are and that our relation to our own epistemic community does not give equal access to all situations (Medina, 130). While Medina's notion of critical openness has influenced my own, the influence is not exclusive and my views have been shaped equally by others such as Vrinda Dalmiya, Lorraine Code, Irene McMullin, and Amy Allen. These multiple sources of inspiration serve to illustrate the gaps between Medina's account of virtue and my own. There are three important differences between our accounts: the number of virtues he discusses (minor difference); the role of corresponding vices (major difference); and the obligation of virtuous behaviour (major difference). In addition to humility, Medina engages with other epistemic virtues, such as curiosity, diligence, and open-mindedness (Medina, 69). The difference in scope between our studies on virtue illustrates a core difference in our respective projects, namely, the place of epistemic virtue in social life. Medina's project is broad in its ambition: he studies the relationship between social oppression and the development of poor epistemic practices (vices) by populations at large; he then appeals to the virtues as means by which persons can resist reinforcing these social relations by working to undo the influence of epistemic vices. By contrast, my project pursues a narrower focus and studies how individual researchers can conduct social research more responsibly. While my restricted application of virtue theory marks a minor difference to Medina, as I show below, my practitioner-focused project is able to secure more plausible normative justification for epistemic improvement than Medina's population-focused account. A second and more serious difference between our accounts of virtue is the place each of us assign to 'vices'. Medina views epistemic vices as entailing corresponding corrective virtues. For example, the vices of arrogance, closed-mindedness, and laziness find their correctives through the virtues of humility, diligence, and open-mindedness (Medina, 69). Vices (of the kind that Medina is concerned with) are forms of epistemic disadvantage which undermine that epistemic capacities of agents – they're poor epistemic habits (Medina, 30). I find Medina's account of epistemic vices to be a convincing account of ideological socialisation, since for Medina, these vices are structural and systemic rather than *incidental* or wholly individual (Medina, 31). Medina understands these vices as socialised and suggests that they can be explained in part by deficits caused by social structures. Where we differ, however, is on the question of whether there is a need for a virtue to correspond to each particular vice, a view Medina appears to endorse, but which I dispute for two reasons. Firstly, it is unclear why a virtue like open-mindedness should not lead to improvement from a putatively non-corresponding vice, like arrogance or laziness. Presumably, acting with open-mindedness would require the individual to engage in the world in ways that limit their capacity for arrogance or laziness. In short, while an account of virtues that entail corresponding vices is certainly clarifying, it does not seem necessary in understanding the transformative benefits of epistemic virtues. Secondly, an account of virtues with corresponding vices seems to present a unhelpfully neat account of poor epistemic practice, in which we can carve up behaviour into different vices, rather than understanding poor epistemic behaviour as the complicated – and overlapping – reflection of social structures into which persons are socialised. The final and most significant difference between Medina's account of virtue and my own, pertains to the normative explanations of our accounts of cultivating epistemic change. My account of humility is limited to practitioners of Critical Theory. As laid out in Chapter One, this allows me to explain the normative duty to perform research with reflexive responsibility (and so with humility) by means of an appeal to Critical Theorist's existing political commitments to social change: if one is commitment to transformative critical research, then one ought to avoid conducting research in ways that stabilise the social conditions one wishes to change (see my discussion of perfectionism and meliorism in Chapter One). This normative explanation is in striking contrast to Medina's. Medina applies this responsibility to cultivate epistemic virtues beyond the methodological requirements of Critical Theory and proposes an

The virtue of humility offers essential support to reflexive responsibility because it safeguards Critical Theory's commitment to situated rationality by promoting an attitude that reduces one's influence on the situation of study.[80] Humility promotes this relational attitude because it demands that individuals decentre their perspective. To decentre one's perspective entails that one acknowledge the limits to one's knowledge and have faith in the belief that by centring the knowledge or insights of others, we can fill these gaps.[81] When the researcher acts with the self-effacing attitude of humility and tries to decentre themselves from the situation of study, they engage with questions that explore how biases might affect their interpretation at a cognitive level. For example, Medina suggests that a responsible epistemic agent acts with humility when they attempt to understand themselves in relation to others, of 'becoming aware of who one is, where one is, and where one comes from.'[82] Thus, a White middle-class professor studying racial injustice in the United States would reflect on how their insider status within positions of academic, racial, economic privilege has shaped their cognitive biases, and establish how these biases bear on their ability to analysis situations in which they are an outsider to the community and injustices they study.

The motivation for these questions comes from the situated nature of knowing. One must acknowledge the intersectional nature of situated knowing, whereby our

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ethical-epistemic obligation on all persons. As Medina writes, 'we all have a prima facie obligation to undergo a process of *self-estrangement*, to cultivate openness to perplexity and to interrogate received attitudes and habits.'[79] This form of estrangement is an interrogation into one's social location and the forms of socialisation one has undergone.[79] But Medina does not offer a clear explanation for the sources of such a universal normative requirement. While I agree with the political sentiment of this obligation, I think it is a very ambitious meta-ethical project to argue that persons have a 'prima facie obligation' to engage in virtuous epistemic behaviour. By contrast, the account of reflexive responsibility and humility laid out in this dissertation offers a convincing argument for why researchers should wish to act with epistemic virtue, as I show that this normative responsibility stems from their existing political commitments.

[80] Ibid

[81] Ibid, 119

[82] Medina, 2013, 53

experience of oppression emerges out of the interaction of multiple interlocking factors,[83] such as identity, income, wealth, and access to essential goods.[84] To remain attuned to these intersecting nodes, responsible reflexive practice must first recognise how the person conducting critique experiences these nodes in different combinations and then reflect on how, due their situation as a researcher, they might face additional or different reflexive obstacles to those encountered by other critics. For example, an academic who is studying situations of injustice as an 'insider-outsider', is very differently situated to an academic who is purely an outsider. The philosopher George Yancy points out how aspects of racialisation can adversely affect our analyses in academic contexts:

> Trained to do philosophy in such normative spaces (that is, white spaces) young white philosophers (men and women) come to inhabit academic spaces without question, without critical self-reflexivity, without readjusting their white gaze.[85]

In Yancy's view – a view heavily influenced by bell hooks's writings on transgressive teaching – the reflexively responsible reaction to this problem for academics who find themselves in this situation is to develop an attitude of openness, that presents a willingness to learn from and be challenged by others.[86] There is much in Yancy's proposal that resonates with my – and other's – call for humility, as both approaches consider it to be reflexively responsible to consider our own standpoint as a critic in order to encourage us to recognise the specific epistemic experiences of different

[83] Sandra Harding, 'Feminist Epistemology In and After the Enlightenment in, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 164-90, 179

[84] Sirma Bilge and Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality* (2nd ed), (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 12

[85] George Yancy, 'Looking at Whiteness: Loving Wisdom and Playing with Danger' in, *Look, A White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness, (*Temple University Press, 2012), 129-51, 134

[86] George Yancy, 'Looking at Whiteness: Subverting Academic Spaces Through the Pedagogical Perspective of bell hooks' in, *Look, A White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness, (*Temple University Press, 2012), 51-81, 55-6

persons.[87] Some will be an insider-outsider, many won't. Thinking with openness and humility will, therefore, lead to different reflexive adjustments by different theorists, depending on the different positions each occupies in the pursuit of their work. Humility, therefore, manifests as an attitude of openness in a person's epistemic character and through its cultivation, contributes to upholding responsible forms of reflexive practice.

But for humility to be really radical, this scrutinizing and decentring gaze must extend beyond a second-order obsession with cognitive gaps, and engage with wider aspects of our epistemic experience. This involves acknowledging the limitations of one's epistemic experience, not only cognitively, as the product of interpretation, but also methodologically (the means of epistemic inquiry) and institutionally (the credibility of one's epistemic position). Only thus, does humility encourage the critical attitude's ambition of remaining vigilant to the situated conditions of knowledge and avoiding complicity in the contexts of oppression with which reflexive practice engages.[88]

On an institutional level, we can consider how academics committed to activism navigate their work as researchers in higher education and the forms of complicity that emerge with the problems they wish to address due to their structural position within these institutions.[89] For example, the nature of academic work, which is structured as a community of experts that pursue work with formal paradigms, presents challenges to Critical Theorists, since these constraints limit scope in both representing the voices of those outside the academy, as well as making problematic the process of

[87] Sandra Harding, "'Strong Objectivity" and Socially Situated Knowledge' in, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 138-63, 122

[88] Finally, as I outline in Section Four, there is an important developmental aspect of humility, understood as a character trait that is refined over time.

[89] Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021, 178

communicating their research back to them.[90] Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly have pointed to the problems that arise from the researcher's institutional setting and the challenges it raises in conducting truly collaborative Critical Theory. As they describe, on account of the epistemic hierarchies that are encouraged by the institutions of expertise, the 'power structures and classed relationalities too often position academics as more knowable than other activists.'[91] Humility in this institutional setting would therefore involve Critical Theorists taking seriously the obstacles raised by their institutional status, their position within epistemic hierarchies, and the means through with their research is disseminated. Reflecting on these factors is important if the critic's diagnoses are to make a genuine contribution to forms of collaborative political change. Humility is an important character trait which encourages theorists to try to expand, or incorporate, wider epistemic collaboration that goes beyond the academy.[92]

On a methodological level, acting with humility encourages the researcher to reflect on whether their methods of diagnosis meet this challenge or whether they hold on obstinately to one perspective or methodology. Humility challenges the researcher to consider other perspectives and methodologies, ones which can meet epistemic complexities such as how pre-existing first-order problems predispose persons to unique vulnerabilities in crises and point to the inseparability and simultaneous occurrence of oppressions.[93] To approach situations as an outsider and interpret them from the outset employing a framework that reduces the experiences to a particular kind, fails to engage with how the situation is lived by those undergoing it. It might transpire that a second-order framework is accurate, but to do due diligence, the

[90] Patricia Hill Collins, 'The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought' in, *Signs,* (Vol. 14: No. 4, 1989), 745-73, 751

[91] Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021, 191

[92] Ibid, 182

[93] Kathryn Sophia Belle, 'Interlocking, Intersecting, and Intermeshing: Critical engagements with Black and Latina Feminist Paradigms of Identity Oppression' in, *Critical Philosophy of Race,* (Vol 8: Nos 1-2, 2020), 165-98, 178

diagnosis should begin by giving equal attention to first-order matters. Otherwise, the critic risks producing inadequate diagnoses of situations and sustaining the oppressions against which their work acts.

Thus, to become more reflexively aware at a methodological level, the researcher must be willing to take up an attitude not only accepting that they might be wrong, but also recognising that answers and insight might be learnt from others, others with different perspectives. The more researchers have cultivated humility, the more they are open to scrutinizing their own methodology, reflecting on what extent their methodology accurately captures and explains the problems at hand, as well as considering whether the situation under analysis gives them reason to doubt their methodology. We can, therefore, see how the general attitude of humility, when combined with the reflexive ambitions of Critical Theory, encourages the deeper reflexive scrutiny that I have called for throughout this dissertation.

In this section, I have established that humility is more than a methodological tick box. It is an attitude whose development promotes a change in the subject's character that connects to the transformative aspirations of reflexive practices. To adopt a virtue-theoretical approach to the study of reflexivity is to view the practical knowledge developed as the aptitude for critique, which resonates with the critical attitude. As a development of the critic's epistemic dispositions, the virtues become a way through which critics engage reflexively with their epistemic character. I develop this account in the next two sections, firstly, by offering firmer theoretical justification for my proposal, before concluding with an outline of the impact of cultivating humility.

## III. EXPLAINING HUMILITY

Thus far, I have argued that the critical attitude entails an implicit commitment to epistemic humility. Recognising this commitment, I have claimed, allows Critical Theorists to carry out their reflexive practice more responsibly than we would otherwise. This is because the virtue of humility draws attention to the broader ways, including the non-cognitive, that our epistemic character can influence the diagnoses of our Critical Theories. Humility also brings into focus the limited change brought about by our diagnoses, something that should encourage researchers to forge stronger collaborative ties between Critical Theory and others outside academia who are tackling injustice and seeking political transformation. Acknowledging Critical Theory's implicit commitment to epistemic humility thereby affords a greater opportunity to act with reflexive responsibility than if our reflexive practice was committed only to achieving autonomy.

Nevertheless, it remains to be explained how humility can be reconciled with the reflexive and emancipatory ambitions of Critical Theory. Can this account of epistemic humility overcome the concerns that recent Critical Theorists have raised about virtue theory? I will show that it can. In this section, I demonstrate that acknowledging humility's place in the critical attitude does not commit Critical Theory to essentialist epistemic foundations. Instead, humility is an example of a pragmatist account of virtue, which improves our epistemic character and helps to increase the likelihood that our diagnoses will be responsible and make a valuable contribution to the emancipatory ambitions of Critical Theory.

My proposal avoids the concerns raised by Rahel Jaeggi that perfectionist explanations rely on an appeal to essentialism.[94] Essentialist justifications promote certain goods by appealing to fixed features of human nature; they claim that only these goods can develop, enhance, or sustain these essential human features and, as a result, contend that such 'goods' are worth promoting. Because such goods are said to promote fixed features of humanity, Critical Theorists, such as Jaeggi, are wary that accepting them would undermine any commitment to the fallibility of reflexive practice. In her critique of the Marxian concept of alienation, Jaeggi lambasts the ambition of a perfectionist ethical theory to 'determine what is objectively good for humans by identifying a set of properties or a set of functions inherent in human nature.'[95] 'How are we to define human nature,' she asks, 'when its extraordinary

[94] While virtue theory and Rahel Jaeggi's framework of forms of life are paradigms that each endorse cumulative learning processes, there is a basic difference in the subject undergoing the change in each case. In virtue theory, the development is undertaken by an individual person and the site of change is that person's character. By contrast, forms of life, as envisaged by Jaeggi, are nexuses of social practices coordinating with one another (Jaeggi, 2018, 61), with the site of change – or 'learning' – being the social values that underpin these social practices. While the individuals who participate in these forms of life are socialised into these values, at no point does Jaeggi make individuals the subject of change in her forms of life paradigm - in marked contrast to virtue theory. Indeed, she is eager to signal to her readers that the location of transformation 'is thus not so much a set of values shared by all as the *implicit normativity of social practise'* (Jaeggi, 2018, 199). Thus, for Jaeggi, it is a human activity that has undergone transformation, in contrast to virtue theory, where it is the people themselves who develop.
More convergence can be identified, however, between the cultivation of humility outlined in this chapter and Jaeggi's account of progressive learning through immanent critique. As Jaeggi observes, immanent criticism is 'the medium (or better, the catalyst) of an *experiential and learning process* that becomes richer and more differentiated as a result of criticism' (Jaeggi, 2018, 204). In identifying inadequate solutions to forms of life problems, Jaeggi believes immanent critique encourages the critic to identify 'the inadequacy of the previous position' (Jaeggi, 2018, 204) and encourages change that enables the smooth running of forms of life. As Jaeggi describes, '[t]his critical examination accompanies a process of education and development whose progress based on 'determinate negation' is a process of enrichment and differentiation involving reworking and adaption' (Jaeggi, 2018, 194). Thus, there certainly exists some resonance between Jaeggi's descriptions of learning and the account of cultivation I have defended in this chapter. This resonance appears sharper when it is pointed out that the development of humility shares with immanent critique the Hegelian view that learning is achieved through some kind of overcoming. Thus, my account of humility is of a character trait that encourages an attitude of self-scrutiny and is cultivated in response to the negative experience of reflexive oversights. Despite these similarities, however, I think it is important to stress the clear differences in my and Jaeggi's approaches and emphasise that in *Critique of Forms of Life,* Jaeggi is clear that her application of immanent critique is to forms of life, not to individuals.

[95] Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (trans. Frederick Neuhouser & Alan E. Smith), (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 29

variability and malleability appear to be part of human nature itself?'[96] Therefore, the concern from a Critical Theory perspective is that a virtue theory presents socially determined qualities as *natural goods,* thereby undermining any claim to reflexive responsibility.

But Jaeggi's argument relies on a misconception that reduces all perfectionism to essentialism. A reflexively responsible approach to Critical Theory can be perfectionist without sliding into essentialist justifications. This can be explained by breaking perfectionist theories into narrow or broad accounts. Narrower accounts promote a restricted understanding of the desired good and argue that excellence is specifically *human*. One example of narrow perfectionism in Critical Theory is Michael J. Thompson's account of human flourishing. Thompson's normative framework appeals to certain positive features of human flourishing. Thompson's appeal to human nature, rooted in the legacy of G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, begins from the negative social experience of suffering or 'thwarted potentialities' rooted in human nature.[97] We are left with a narrow perfectionist approach in which suffering discloses ontological features which have been blocked, and their hindered development justifies their normativity; these are features of human nature described by Thompson as an 'inversion of some basic set of needs and potentials that any social context produces.'[98] While Thompson states that these are not an '*a priori* set of categories of the social world,'[99] this is undermined by his effort to anchor his emancipation with an appeal to 'show how certain *essential structures* of human sociality are deformed and mutilated by the forms or shapes of organisation it takes on under capitalism.'[100]

[96] Ibid, 30
[97] Michael J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory,* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 196
[98] Ibid
[99] Ibid
[100] Ibid, 195

Jaeggi's challenge is, therefore, appropriate to narrow accounts of perfectionism, as found in Thompson's work.[101]

By contrast, Jaeggi's ire does not apply to my account of humility. Humility is a pragmatic virtue. This means it is not connected to a fixed human good; it is socially constructed to help us achieve a good within these social conditions. The virtue of humility is not natural or universal, but cultivated under social conditions.[102] I am not making a case for humility whereby the virtues are understood to have non-derivative justification and count 'as an ultimate reason' for action.[103] I follow a pragmatist interpretation of the virtues, whereby the value of humility is that it serves Critical Theory's emancipatory ambitions of contributing to transformative action. Acting with reflexive responsibility thus requires us to engage with situated rationality in a way that contributes to the emancipatory ambitions of critique, to which humility is beneficial. Appealing to humility as an epistemic good does not, therefore, entail a hard commitment to the virtues serving as the explanatory 'ultimate reason'[104]; the appeal to humility requires no commitment to essentialism.

Instead, reflexive practice relies on a broad perfectionist good that is socially situated. As the philosopher Thomas Hurka describes, broad accounts of perfectionism offer the 'more inclusive view that values some development of capacities or some achievement of excellence.'[105] The epistemic goods developed in reflexive practice are broad since they do not appeal to distinct features of humans to justify their claim to be good. Nothing about a broad account of perfectionism

[101] Jaeggi, 2018, 30
[102] Medina, 2013, 43
[103] Roger Crisp, 'Modern Moral Philosophy and the Virtues' in, *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* (ed. Roger Crisp), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1-18, 24
[104] Ibid
[105] Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40

commits one to essentialism. Rather, the good of humility refers only to forms of conduct necessary to acknowledge reflexivity deficits and social injustices.[106]

Unlike Jaeggi, therefore, I support the possibility of non-foundationalist virtue ethics of the sort alluded to by Raymond Geuss. This framework rejects the claim that individuals have any foundational or pre-existing (or even unconscious) desires[107] and maintains that while Critical Theory must draw on virtue theory, it must do so in ways appropriate to its ambitions as a critical project.[108] This can be defended as a broad perfectionist account of reflexive practice that simply points to the dangers of irresponsible reflexive practice. Reflexive practice is directed at improving our self-understanding and avoiding the implications of *not* being reflexive enough. In so doing, the claim directs us to the remedial need for reflexive practice.[109] The connection between virtue theory and the critical attitude is, therefore, not an essentialist one. Humility is an epistemic character trait defined by scrutiny, such that its fulfilment encourages a change.

This disposition of self-scrutiny that defines humility allows us to dismiss a second concern about virtue theory, one raised by Honneth. Honneth fears that since the virtues emerge from specific hermeneutic horizons, the goods are not critically secure and risk becoming inherently conservative. In this regard, there is a similarity to Jürgen Habermas's critique of the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer's idea of 'tradition'.[110] Honneth is wary of the hermeneutic character of the virtues. Since

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[106] I do not dismiss the possibility that critique might proceed *positively* (rather than negatively) as a narrow form of perfectionism, but neither do I endorse it. It is simply an ambition I leave to others to explore.

[107] Raymond Guess, 'Virtue and the Good Life' in, *Outside Ethics,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 78-96, 93

[108] Ibid, 94

[109] I suggest that even a staunch negativist to accept these epistemic perfectionist conditions. By negativism, I do not merely refer to the motivation deriving from negative social experiences, but what is a negative in perfectionist terms in so far as it does not reference a fixed, anthropological essence.

[110] Axel Honneth, 'Between Hermeneutics and Hegelianism: John McDowell and the Challenge of Moral Realism' in, *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World* (ed. Nicholas H. Smith), (London: Routledge, 2002), 246-66, 255

they are goods that describe desirable forms of behaviour within a particular moral culture, Honneth fears the virtues might undermine reflexive practice and end up reinforcing a moral culture uncritically 'through the circular application of traditional knowledge to each new situation.'[111] In this respect, Honneth raises similar concerns to Jaeggi. For Honneth, justifying Critical Theory by appealing to virtue would be reflexively irresponsible, since a virtue theory presents socially determined goods, or thick cultural values, as generalisable human goods.

But Honneth's concerns are unfounded when applied to the epistemic good of humility. In fact, humility is an epistemic good that reinforces the scepticism required by immanent critique and, through its development, the agent pushes back against the influence that hermeneutic traditions have upon our epistemic character. The role of this virtue is to cultivate an awareness of the situatedness of one's values.[112] This shows how humility is a stabilising force for the critical attitude within one's epistemic character. Humility is an attitude that, when developed, helps to preserve the radical and transformative ambitions of the critical attitude. In this respect, the virtue of humility is the very opposite of being inherently conservative.

This places humility in between two broad approaches to the idea of change advocated in Critical Theory, which Seyla Benhabib has described as the politics of fulfilment and the politics of transfiguration.[113] On a *fulfilment* model, rationality is diagnosed as socially deficient when it blocks the realisation of certain norms of institutions. Here, the critic's emancipatory interest works toward a collective praxis that would better articulate the potential of underpinning norms. This is seen most explicitly in Honneth's account of 'ethical life', whereby social institutions of the

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111 Ibid

112 Ibid

113 Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory,* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 41

family, law, and civil society are those required to socialise persons into collective ethical life but are frustrated in their achievements due to capitalism and the pressures this places on modes of socialisation.[114] In a *transfigurative* mode, Benhabib explains, rationality is pathological, and so are the underlying norms and institutions that rationality preserves. The emancipatory interest of a Critical Theory works towards a collective praxis that requires social rationality to be transfigured, as proposed by Jaeggi in her account of immanent critique.[115]

By advocating a perfectionist theory of humility, my proposal for reflexive practice is committed to both. It is committed to the politics of fulfilment in so far as the critic tries to fulfil pre-existing norms whose present realisation is obstructed by social conditions. But reflexive practice is also committed to the politics of transformation, since it forms part of an endless effort to change those things which, in their state, help stabilize structural injustices (be they institutions or kinds of epistemic behaviour). Humility is thereby a virtue which promotes both fulfilment and transformation. When reflexive practice succeeds in scrutinizing one's epistemic character thoroughly, then it *fulfils* the ambitions of acting with humility. Simultaneously, the open-ended character of the virtue of humility advocates an ongoing transformation of our attitudes and methods to ensure that they are appropriate to the situation of study. The transformation is a change in character requiring us to adopt a critical attitude. The critical attitude shows epistemic character under constant construction. By developing humility, one's epistemic character is transfigured constantly.[116]

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[114] See: Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Democratic Foundations of Democratic Life* (trans. Joseph Ganahl), (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014)

[115] Jaeggi, 2018, 205

[116] There are certain resemblances to the work of Stanley Cavell and his emphasis on cultivation within his approach of 'Emersonian Perfectionism'. Cavell presents an account of self that is situated within each situation and appears to overcome itself in the next. While Cavell claims that his perfectionism 'implies Perfectibility (12),' the perfected self is not a continuous or coherent-temporarily thing, but something

This emphasis in my account of humility on transformation of one's epistemic character is not at odds with the overarching emancipatory aims of Critical Theory. Rather, it is an effort to make researchers politically and epistemically humble with respect to the role of their work in the context of larger political struggles and the limited change wrought by their research. Critique is a vital counterpart to emancipatory struggle, as it takes place through social movements and political demands. But the work of the theorist neither leads these struggles, nor can serve as a political substitute for them. The praxis of critique – to which humility contributes – tries to expose those conditions which generate pathological effects on reason in order to inform individuals about these ideological effects, how they function to preserve social conditions that stabilise oppression. The effect of researcher's critiques is not, however, a gestalt switch, which, once pressed, ensures that the problems disappear. As Jaeggi puts it, 'the existence of ideology can't be reduced to 'merely an error or a cognitive mistake.'[117] Rather, the diagnosis and analysis has to occur alongside and in some sort of collaboration with wider political practice. Thus, rather than being at odds with emancipation, humility is a character trait that helps researchers keep the political contributions of their work in perspective, by encouraging them, as I have said, to be humble with respect to the role of their work in the context of larger political struggles.

Nor should the promotion of humility promote political paralysis. Were humility to result in political paralysis (at a large or individual level), it would implies that practical action had been stalled as result of the researcher's endless self-reflection: that the theorist is so paranoid of contaminating their analyses of a situation with their own

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that is attained and then negated in each situation. By understanding the self, or character, in terms of an accumulation of habits and values, I argue, cultivation helps us to understand the self as continuous, as something socialised with habits and interpretations develops historically. See: Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism: The Carus Lectures, 1988* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[117] Rahel Jaeggi, 'Rethinking Ideology' in, *New Waves in Political Philosophy* (eds. Christopher Zurn and Boujdewijn de Bruijn), (London: Palgrave, 2009), 63-86, 68

prejudices, that they never get around to social critique itself. As I stated in the Introduction to this thesis, such a 'reflexivity trap' is a live possibility, and I explained how efforts of understanding and combating racism can soon collapse into individual acts of self-improvement. An emphasis on humility in Critical Theory should not produce such outcomes for two reasons. First, humility would not promote political paralysis at a collective level, since the reflexive practice outlined in this thesis is being undertaken by the researcher. As I have argued, since the researcher neither leads social struggles nor brings about change directly through their research, fears that humility might stall political action only arise if we inflate the political significance of the theorist and their work. Second, humility – and reflexive practice more generally – would not encourage political paralysis of the individual researcher, if reflexive practice separated itself from the wider emancipatory ambitions of critique. Reflexive practice – as supported by the virtue of humility – is not self-reflection for its own sake. It is a process of analysis that is situated within a specific political context, which encourages the theorists to factor in their own social position in relation to others. Thus, in the process of assessing one's own social location, one should become more attuned to the positions of others and to the politically significant fault lines. Thus, rather than paralysing political action, humility should foster clarity in a theorist's mind as to what is at stake politically in the situation.

In this section, I have addressed the underlying concern raised by Critical Theorists, namely, that it is reflexively irresponsible. I have demonstrated that acknowledging the contribution of humility in the critical attitude appeals neither to an essentialist justification, nor does it promote an inherently conservative reflexive practice. Instead, I have shown humility to rely upon a pragmatist conception of virtues that presents them as developing our epistemic character in ways that contribute to, rather than hinder, the emancipatory ambitions of a Critical Theory. I

now turn, in the final section of this chapter, to illustrating how this pragmatist virtue framework explains the transformative effects of the critical attitude through the cultivation of humility.

## IV. CULTIVATING HUMILITY

Using a virtue framework to uncover the importance of humility within the critical attitude affords an opportunity to conceive of more responsible approaches to reflexive practice. This virtue is a valuable component of reflexive practice and the critical attitude because humility informs our epistemic character and is thereby capable of connecting knowledge practices to the transformative ambitions of critique. As I demonstrate in this final section, acknowledging the implicit commitment to humility in the critical attitude, brings into focus the limited scope of Critical Theory's transformative contribution. Indeed, it requires the theorist to be humble with regards to the transformative effects of Critical Theory. Thus, the only guaranteed change that Critical Theory achieves is the increased reflexive insight of the theorist: the development of the virtue of humility. Whether the diagnoses of Critical Theory do in fact contribute to social transformation cannot be guaranteed, only hoped for.

While few would be so naive to attribute major transformative significance to the diagnoses of Critical Theory alone, to perform critique responsibly requires us to understand what the activity of critique can actually achieve. It is important to recognise that the effect of a Critical Theory's diagnoses is not a gestalt switch, which, once triggered, enables our social problems to disappear. Jaeggi acknowledges these limitations of the praxis of Critical Theory. Despite her cognitive picture of ideology, rooted in second-order blockages, Jaeggi points to the limitations of critical praxis. Much like Celikates, who I discussed in Section One, according to Jaeggi, the task of

Critical Theory is to expose those conditions which generate pathological effects on reason, in order to inform individuals about these ideological effects and how they function to preserve social conditions which work against the individual's interests and flourishing. But, as she diagnoses, since 'the existence of ideology' can't be reduced to 'merely an error or a cognitive mistake,'[118] the diagnosis and analysis have to occur alongside and in some sort of collaboration with wider political practice.

Responsible reflexive practice – developed through cultivating humility – ought to bring about a change in the epistemic character of the theorist. Thus, cultivating humility is important because reflexive practice develops the epistemic character of the theorist which improves the quality of their diagnoses. This in turn has the potential to connect their work to emancipatory projects. At a basic level, the critic's diagnoses should give them greater understanding as to how they can adjust their behaviour *to reduce their complicity* in structures of injustice. Understanding the development of humility should also enable us to recognise the reflexive practice as a process of refashioning that acknowledges the temporary and constructed nature of our epistemic character and encourages the researcher to bring this insight to their research. The result of both of these transformations are to make critique more responsible in carrying out its emancipatory ambitions of offering robust diagnoses of social injustice, diagnoses which can then be analysed and addressed by political activists.

Two important questions remain to be answered, however. First, how is humility cultivated? Second, what is the nature of the change on the critic's epistemic character? Beginning with the first question: my answer is that one significant way in which humility can be cultivated within Critical Theory is through the practice of immanent

[118] Jaeggi, 2009, 68

critique. As discussed at several points throughout this dissertation, the method of immanent critique is the means by which Critical Theorists analyse societies in order to diagnoses the sources of social injustice. The common ground between various approaches to immanent critique is that criticism evaluates an object against the standards that an object sets for itself. The object under analysis, therefore, is judged on its *own terms*. The purpose of this analysis is to contribute to forms of political and social change. As Benhabib states, '[i]mmanent critique is first and foremost a critique of dogmatism and the myth of the given.'[119] Thus, to critique society immanently is to evaluate it on its own terms, to use its own norms as a standard to measure it by.

For example, an analysis of the vast expansion of prisons and incarceration rates in the in United Stated over the past twenty-five years – the era of 'mass incarceration' – could well conclude that this expansion was justified at public level by appealing to the norms of 'security' and removing the sources of criminality that undermine the stability of communities. However, a deeper examination of the mass incarceration might show that it was not in fact having this effect of increased social stability, but rather, as Angela Y. Davis describes, that 'prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings.'[120] This analysis might be substantiated by looking at the increased poverty level in single-parent households, or at the barriers to employment and education faced by ex-felons upon their re-entry to society.[121] Under these conditions, immanent critique analyses the disconnect between the ambition of the norm under analysis – increased social stability – and the actually execution of this

[119] Benhabib, 1987, 41

[120] Angela Y. Davis, 'Masked Racism; Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex; What is the Prison Industrial Complex? Why does it matter? In, *Colorlines,* (Vol. 1: No. 2, 1998), 1-11, 1

[121] Geneva Brown, 'The Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Reentry: Challenges for African-American women' in, *American Constitution Society,* November 2010, 4

norms: increased social instability among certain – predominantly African American – communities in the United States.[122]

By exposing the faulty norm through immanent critique, we recognise that a contradiction between practice and its standards requires that the standards themselves must transform.[123] We are then forced to identify better norms that are aware of their possible failure. Jaeggi describes immanent critique as 'an experimental learning process' in which the 'process of failing and overcoming failure takes the form of a moment of differentiating enrichment and progress.'[124] We don't move towards a fixed normative yardstick; instead, the yardstick moves alongside the analysis of society. For Jaeggi, the subject of the learning process is society at large. Thus, the transformative contribution of Critical Theory is its ability to highlight weaknesses in the values of a society's social practices.

My suggestion is that to develop the character trait of epistemic humility is, first and foremost, to develop the disposition to critique dogmatism and the myth of the given, especially in oneself as a knower. Thus, to reflect on and to develop the practice of immanent critique is a profound way in which to cultivate humility. The transformative contribution of Critical Theory is its ability to highlight weaknesses in the values of a society's social practices. In a similar fashion, developed through the reflective practice of immanent critique, humility has the capacity to transform our epistemic character by highlighting the weaknesses in the values of our own epistemic practices. As Jaeggi acknowledges, the transformative effects of immanent critique are not guaranteed and require collaboration for social change. Nonetheless, what does change through immanent critique, is the critic's overall conduct and perspectives:

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122 Arneta Rogers, 'How Police Brutality Harms Mothers: Linking Police Violence to the Reproductive Justice Movement' in, *Hastings Race and Poverty Law Journal,* (Vol. 12: No.2, 2015), 205-34, 210-11

123 Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life* (trans. Ciaran Cronin), (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 204

124 Jaeggi, 2018, 206

their epistemic character. Centring humility requires us to realise that while Critical Theory, with its commitment to immanent critique, offers the opportunity for transformation, it cannot of itself guarantee that transformation.

By conceiving of reflexive practice in a manner that follows the intersection of standpoint theory and virtue epistemology, I am pointing to the cumulative learning effected by the critical attitude of taking an oppositional stance to 'any specific theoretical content.'[125] It is an effort to see the effect of diagnosis as happening to the researcher. The Habermasian Critical Theorist, Thomas McCarthy, captures the open-ended character of Critical Theory, that its findings are never absolute nor complete, when he describes it as 'an ever-renewed effort to comprehend contemporary society from a practically interesting point of view.'[126] I am developing this account by emphasising how the open-ended character of Critical Theory leaves its mark on the theorist conducting research.

We can see this insight developed through the work of the late philosopher Gillian Rose and her engagement with the concept of reflexivity. Rose attacks the view that reflexive practice achieves a transparent understanding of the self,[127] claiming the suggestion rests on a misconception 'since there is no prior reality or unified identity to gain access to or to be created by research.'[128] Transparent reflexivity assumes 'a transparently knowable self [that is] separate from its transparently knowable context.'[129] Rose challenges the view that the self can be unpicked from its context and encourages us to engage with the 'messiness' of researching and focusing on our situated selves. She argues that the failure of transparent reflexivity does not imply the

[125] Horkheimer, 1975, 207, 232, and 234
[126] David Hoy and Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory,* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 18
[127] Gillian Rose, 'Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Refelxivities and Other Tactics' in, *Progress in Human Geography,* (Vol. 21: No. 3, 1997), 305-20, 311
[128] Ibid, 315
[129] Ibid, 314

failure of claims to situated knowledge.[130] Instead, research should be seen as constitutive (if not entirely so), both of the researcher and the 'other' involved in the research process.'[131] Rose cautions against conceiving of reflexivity as self-discovery and instead, offers it as a project of self-formation. But, as she notes, the theorist cannot take up such a perspective and simultaneously hold that there is a 'transparent' self waiting to be revealed.'[132] Cultivation, as I have argued, promotes a continual process of refashioning one's epistemic character in reflexive practice. What emerges as stable and reliable from this process is not a mythical transparent self, but a set of cultivated dispositions which constitute the critic's epistemic character.

A cultivational approach to critique is, therefore, distinguished by the idea of a learning process that produces these *stable* and *reliable* effects.[133] Developing skills is a prime example. Unlike a *knack* for something, such as prising apart tightly wound knots in shoe-laces, a skill, like learning a foreign language or mastering a musical instrument, requires an understanding of the activity undertaken, time to refine one's execution, and the motivation to persevere.[134] Things which are cultivated only become stable and reliable through repeated performance, until they become entrenched and aren't easily overridden. It is in this vein that we should understand the virtues implicit the development of the critical attitude: that the critical attitude is a cultivated character trait, rather than natural aptitude.[135] Likewise, humility is an epistemic excellence which takes root in one's epistemic character the more we act with it: by *acting* with humility regularly enough, one *becomes* a more humble person,[136] since it involves more than a

[130] Ibid, 315
[131] Ibid
[132] Ibid, 313
[133] Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 9
[134] Ibid, 20
[135] Julia Annas, 'Virtue Ethics', 520
[136] Dalmiya, 21

change in action; it requires a change in a person's perspective, from a *self*-regarding to an *other*-regarding perspective.[137]

In this section, I have outlined the transformative effects of humility on the critic's epistemic character. I showed that, significantly, those transformative effects can emerge as a result of the critic's engagement with immanent critique. Thus we have seen both the effect of humility on the critic through the production of the critical attitude, and an opportunity to bring humility to the project of Critical Theory itself. Incorporating the development of humility into the project of Critical Theory is, I believe, essential if the discipline of Critical Theory is to advance its emancipatory ambitions. Promoting such ambitions requires collaboration between different groups as opposed to perceiving oneself as constituting the critical vanguard.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have proposed an alternative vision for understanding reflexive practice in Critical Theory, one that is rooted in virtue epistemology. Subscribing to this vision has two benefits for Critical Theory. First, it brings an explanatory benefit: it improves our understanding of reflexive practice and the critical attitude. I have argued that focusing on the virtue of humility offers an illuminating explanation of the ongoing nature of the critical attitude and, in contrast to alternative accounts which advocate autonomy, offers insight into how the critical attitude is an aptitude that is cultivated and improved. Secondly, I have suggested that acknowledging Critical Theory's implicit commitment to the virtue of humility increases the diagnostic potential of reflexive practice. This is because appealing to a virtue theoretical account

[137] Irene McMullin, 'A Modest Proposal: Accounting for the Virtuousness of Modesty', 786

of reflexive practice increases the level of self-scrutiny performed by the critic in the course of their research, encouraging them to look beyond their cognitive blockages in order to confront the reflexive barriers raised by the wider aspects of their epistemic lives, aspects such as their methodologies and their position within epistemic hierarchies.

As a result of this second benefit, I proposed that once we identify the implicit commitment to humility within the critical attitude, we place ourselves in a strong position to address the irresponsible effects of focusing reflexive practice on autonomy and second-order blockages. Humility provides a standard immanent to reflexive practice by which we can evaluate the reflexive depth of accounts of reflexive practice and thereby bring to light any omissions, or distortions which may be inherent in them and which may be limiting to the theorists who adopt them. Anchoring reflexive practice in the virtue of humility, therefore, offers much needed insight into how we promote Critical Theories that are reflexively responsible.

As I have explained and illustrated in Chapter One, the concept of reflexivity has been a central pillar of contemporary social sciences, especially anthropology. And supporting that pillar is a commitment to the intellectual virtue of reflexive humility – although research suggests that this virtue is embraced more in theory than in practice. The application of reflexive humility to Critical Theory consequently may appear underwhelming. Unfortunately, this is not the case. While the suggestion seems obvious, the attempt at clarity is nevertheless important since basic tenants of reflexive practice are *not* implemented in contemporary Critical Theory. As the thesis has shown, key methodological aspects of the theories here pay inadequate attention to the social location of agents. As such, while it is true that many social scientists would agree about the basic importance of humility, this thesis has shown that these commitments are not obviously carried through in their research. My emphasis on the

importance of the concept to discussions of reflexivity in the social sciences is, therefore, an effort to advocate for the development of virtuous epistemic conduct, since this helps to promote genuinely reflexive research.

# CONCLUSION

# Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the concept of reflexivity in Critical Theory. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that this methodological act of self-scrutiny, within the full scope of an emancipatory political philosophy, is not the sexiest feature of Critical Theory. But by establishing a responsibility framework for reflexive practice, this dissertation has demonstrated the central importance of reflexivity to the transformative ambitions of Critical Theory. Performing critique in a responsible manner increases the likelihood that the researcher's diagnoses will be valuable and accurate, and thus make analytic contributions that promote forms of social change. Less dramatically, I have argued, the performance of responsible critique is also likely to help cultivate the critical attitude in the researcher. Thus, the responsibility framework presented in this dissertation should help us to evaluate others's, and our own, reflexive practice and encourage the performance of better Critical Theory.

To this end, my study into the concept of reflexivity has delivered three contributions to Critical Theory. The first being the introduction of a responsibility framework to our understanding of reflexive practice. Introducing this conception of reflexive practice makes a practical contribution to the discipline, since it provides future theorists with an immanent means of evaluating forms of reflexive practice. To understand reflexive practice as entailing certain epistemic responsibilities, therefore, allows future Critical Theorists to achieve a clearer perspective on how they can avoid the risks of 'irresponsible' critique. The effect of irresponsible critique is that it risks making the critic and their analyses complicit to the social injustices they are wishing to overturn.

The second, and more important, contribution is that I have made explicit the connection between the two fundamental aspects of Critical Theory: its reflexive and its emancipatory ambitions. Establishing this connection between these two aspects of Critical Theory through distinguishing between their perfectionist and melioristic goals also provides the normative explanation for the responsibilities that guide reflexive practice: the motivation to perform critique in a reflexively responsible manner derives from the theorist's ambition to collaborate in promoting social transformation. To fulfil this goal requires that the researcher to avoid conducting critique in ways that undermine this transformative ambition.

The third contribution follows on from this emancipatory insight and is an explanation of the effect of responsible reflexive practice. The effect of responsible reflexive practice, I have argued in this dissertation, is the cultivation of the critical attitude. Drawing upon a virtue-epistemic framework, I have argued, illustrates the implicit commitment to the virtue of humility within the critical attitude envisioned by Max Horkheimer. I present humility as a character trait that, when cultivated, promotes an attitude of openness to one's fallibility. Exercising humility in the context of reflexive practice appears as the practice of ongoing self-scrutiny to other parts of one's epistemic life (in the form of one's epistemic character).

I have argued that this virtue is 'pragmatist', insofar as, appealing to humility makes no claim to it being an essentialist value with respect to human beings. Instead, humility is an attitude for the researcher to develop in order that they become more aware of the biases they bring to their research and how these presuppositions might blind their diagnostic interrogations to certain social experiences. Humility also encourages the theorist to recognise the limitations of their work within the larger picture of instigating social change. Acknowledging these two parts of humility allows us to envisage more responsible forms of reflexive practice; ones that are thorough in

their examination of the situated conditions of social analysis, and open to conducting research that can engage and seek discussion with political movements that are not restricted to the academy.

To illustrate the value of my contributions, throughout this thesis, I have engaged the work of Critical Theorists and demonstrated how their work can be interpreted as reflexively irresponsible. Doing this has brought clarity to the discipline's understanding of reflexive practice, but it has also served as concrete examples of the value of using a responsibility framework to evaluate Critical Theories. These studies have illuminated the ways in which Critical Theory have been seen to pursue irresponsible methodologies that undermine the transformative ambitions of Critical Theory.

The central symptom of irresponsible critique examined throughout this dissertation has the methodological decision to frame reflexive practice as a purely second-order form of scrutiny. These blockages refer to the conceptual dimension of our social experiences, and form the values and presuppositions that underpin and frame our immediate experience of the world. By engaging with the Kantian and Left-Hegelian strands of Critical Theory, I demonstrated how the centring of second-order values has led the tradition to mischaracterise the social conditions operating under structural injustices, such as racism. In Chapter Two, I demonstrated how Rainer Forst's commitment to studying contexts of injustice in terms of the second-order issues tied to the right to justification, have led him to underplay the complexity of structural injustices. The result of his methodology, I argued, was an over emphasis on the abstract dimensions of social life, which has led his work to underplay the specificity of first-order injustices intersecting with one another. As such, they were shown to be reflexively irresponsible.

I identified a similar issue with Rahel Jaeggi's emphasis on second-order blockages. Jaeggi's theoretical framework – a critique of forms of life – is intended to diagnose the breakdowns in social practices that precipitate the emergence of social crises. As I detailed, her account relied on a hierarchy of social problems, in which the most important ones for the critic to consider were those of the second-order. A regrettable consequence of Jaeggi's decision to centre critique around second-order problems, is that the subsequent method underplays the significance of first-order lived conditions and the specific way in which they predispose some groups to vulnerabilities. By reading social breakdowns through the collapse of their underpinning values, Jaeggi's critic – like Forst's – presupposes a degree of ubiquity amongst the agents who participate in the form of life. Overlooking the material, first-order features of social crises were thus shown to produce irresponsible forms of diagnosis that were too abstract.

My repeated criticism throughout this dissertation, directed towards Critical Theory's engagement with second-order blockages, should, however, not be mistaken for a recommendation that we omit second-order blockages from our diagnoses. Anchoring my critiques in the study of racialisation – predominantly in the United States – has given ample examples of the cognitive effect that racial ideologies have on the second-order values that frame our social experience. This was illustrated in detail in Chapter Four with respect to the influence of racialisation upon our aesthetic values, demonstrating how susceptible our aesthetic values are to second-order blockages. My critiques, rather, have pointed to the irresponsible reflexive consequences that arise when the diagnoses of Critical Theory either reduce the reflexive lens to second-order issues, or overemphasise the explanatory significance of the issues. Thus, my overall intention in these critiques was to demonstrate the need to conduct critique with a

wider and more responsible reflexive gaze, one capable of scrutinizing the non-cognitive parts of our epistemic character.

Despite these contributions, there remain certain weaknesses with the project. Firstly, for a project so concerned with promoting an engaged and responsible method of Critical Theory, this dissertation seemingly reinforces the image of a disengaged and irresponsible mode of criticism. This is a result of my dissertation's methodological focus. Such criticism is fair and my response to it is simply that having constructed a responsibility framework in this dissertation, going forward, as I outline below, my objective would be to use it in non-methodological research projects.

Secondly, there are likely to be concerns surrounding the implications of my engagement with Critical Theory. One might question whether the sample size of Critical Theorists is too small to substantiate the arguments at the heart of this dissertation. Is it plausible, one might ask, to reduce the diversity of contemporary Critical Theorists to the perspectives studied in this thesis? Furthermore, from a contrasting perspective, it might be suggested that I fetishize the perception that there still exists, a hundred years after the formation of the Frankfurt School, a coherent idea of 'Critical Theory'. Each of these second concerns have their justification. Were the project to be expanded, I would make greater effort to develop the distinct nature of 'Frankfurt School' Critical Theory in more detail and establish in clear terms the ways in which the contemporary theorists studied in this dissertation can be described, with justification, as a continuation of this tradition. Furthermore, to help the readers understand the concept of reflexivity, it might be desirable to add more historical context to the use of reflexive practice in early Critical Theory. This would be achieved by breaking Chapter One into two separate chapters, and expand the account of the critical attitude, that I outlined in the work of Max Horkheimer, and place it alongside the work of other early Critical Theorists. The resulting chapter would follow a

tripartite structure and, having outlined Horkheimer's work, would go on to consider the approaches to reflexive practice found in the work of Theodor W. Adorno, in particular, Adorno's account of non-identical thinking in *Negative Dialectics* (1969), and Herbert Marcuse's account of negative thinking, presented in *One Dimensional Man* (1964).

However, while providing such a historical explanation of reflexive practice is interesting, the project lacks political urgency. Concluding this project leaves me with the impression that it is more important for Critical Theory to break away from its institutional reference points and engage with forms practical forms of social analysis. To this end, I hope to develop my responsibility framework to consider collective problems of reflexivity and situate them within wider problems connected to epistemologies of ignorance. In doing so, it allows me to place scrutiny on my own advocacy of a virtue theoretical framework, as presented in this dissertation.

To this end, the practical application of my dissertation to future projects can be envisaged. One possible direction is to take the reflexive responsibility framework and situate it in forms of collective or institutional problems of reflexivity, in particular, collective forms of wilful ignorance. For example, the 2020 toppling of the statue of former slave-owner, Edward Colston, embodied a renewed call for the United Kingdom to engage acts of reflexivity. Reflexive practice is specific to Critical Theory. This practice would aim to confront the United Kingdom's colonial legacies and form the basis of reckoning with national self-understanding. These calls to decolonise, faced much resistance from the government and cultural institutions. My future research would address how such cultural institutions in the United Kingdom have resisted calls from the public to decolonise. I wish to argue that this institutional behaviour should be understood as a form of *wilful ignorance*.

If ignorance is simply a lack of knowledge, then wilful ignorance describes an unwillingness to acknowledge ignorance and a resistance to correcting it. Several museums in the United Kingdom displayed institutional wilful ignorance for multiple reasons, such as financial interests tied to fears of redistributed wealth, as well as reputational interests tied to an awareness of the present government's attitudes on decolonisation. If and when such institutions *did* begin processes of reflexive practice, it would have been rare, because epistemic virtues were not playing a motivational and corrective role. Rather, external public-political pressure, in the forms of boycotts, protests, or shaming, became the motivating factor.

My future research would therefore consider examples of institutional wilful ignorance that could expand our understanding of reflexive practices due to its different motivational structure. While wilful ignorance is an epistemic problem, the unwillingness of institutions to engage in reflexive practice demonstrates why we cannot rely simply on epistemic solutions. Extra-epistemic resources are therefore required when instigating processes of collective or civic reflexivity. My research would argue that institutional wilful ignorance forces us to recognise the political limitations of reflexive practice found in Critical Theory when we are addressing processes of collective or civic reflexivity. This project would also illustrate the limitations of appealing to epistemic virtues when dealing with uncooperative or unmotivated agents. Thus, thus next stage of my research is but one example of the ways in which responsible reflexive practice can be shown to move beyond methodological discussions and serve to promote actual critical diagnoses.

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# Chapter One
## *Reflexive Practices*


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## *Reflexivity and Interpretation*


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## *Reflexive Humility*


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