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## Immanent Critique and Particular Moral Experience

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### ABSTRACT

Critical theories often express scepticism towards the idea that social critique should draw on general normative principles, seeing such principles as bound to dominant conceptual frameworks. However, even the models of immanent critique developed in the Frankfurt School tradition seem to privilege principles over particular moral experiences. Discussing the place that particular moral experience has in the models of Honneth, Ferrara and Adorno, the article argues that experience can play an important negative role even for a critical theory that is committed to the necessity of conceptual mediation, as moral experiences can undermine our confidence in the appropriateness of our moral concepts. Building on McDowell's account of moral perception and Brandom's interpretation of Hegel's theory of experience, one can reconstruct Adorno as providing a "radically negativist" approach to immanent critique that takes particular moral experience seriously.

### KEYWORDS



Critical theory; immanent critique; moral perception; Theodor W. Adorno; Axel Honneth; Robert Brandom; John McDowell

### Principles and the particular

In the history of critical social thought and among contemporary proponents of critical theories of society, there has been a dispute concerning what role general normative principles – maybe even *universal moral principles* – should play in our understanding of the activity of social critique. There is disagreement not only about what particular principles might provide the foundations of social critique, but also about whether a model of reasoning that proceeds from general normative principles to particular judgments is, as such, desirable. The roots of this scepticism are to be found in Marx's critique of bourgeois conceptions of law and justice.<sup>1</sup> From within a broadly Marxist tradition, Lukács and Adorno have advanced additional arguments for a critique of the primacy of principles.<sup>2</sup> Departing from very different theoretical premises, this scepticism about principle-based normative reasoning is finally also shared by those critical theorists who draw their inspiration from Foucault.

Of course, the reasons that thinkers in these diverse traditions advance are very different from each other. While the Marxist tradition sees abstract normative principles either as an ideological expression of the logic of exchange or (less interestingly) as the attempt of one class to present its interests in the form of universality,<sup>3</sup> Adorno argues that general

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conceptual principles always carry the risk of violence towards the specificity of the particular with them.<sup>4</sup> The Foucauldian tradition draws our attention to the link between normativity and normalisation, an argument which supports the idea that a social critique of processes of social normalisation might undermine itself if it is conceptualised on an inferential model, that is, as applying general principles to specific cases.<sup>5</sup>

While diverse in their specific arguments, these objections all oppose a specific picture of normativity: this picture assumes that any critique of social phenomena must proceed by an argument showing that there are, first, some appropriate general principles of normative evaluation, and second, that some social phenomenon fails to conform to these principles. Against this picture of critique, it is not only objected that such principles might not be forthcoming (especially if they are supposed to be justifiable to everyone), but that the very idea that all critique must rely on *independently justified principles* might be misguided.

While it is true that contemporary liberal theory subscribes to this picture of normativity, critical theories think of themselves as immune against this objection. This is because they take themselves to engage in *immanent critique*, that is, a critique that refrains from using independently justified moral principles but instead relies on a reconstruction of the implicit normative premises of modern social practices to criticise forms of oppression and domination.

But it is not completely clear whether critical theories are indeed immune against the anti-normativist objection. In recent debates within critical theory, several authors have developed new arguments for the claim that the idea of critique as the application of moral principles is, as such, fundamentally problematic.<sup>6</sup> While I cannot reconstruct their arguments here, one intuition that fuels these arguments is the idea that we lose a part of the significance of *particular social experiences of injustice* when we treat judgments that are motivated by such experiences only as applications of some more general principle.<sup>7</sup> This objection concerns traditional political philosophy and theories of immanent critique to the same extent, because it is opposed to the very idea of critique as the application of principles, no matter whether they are justified independently of social practices or justified through the reconstruction of immanent norms.

In this article, I would like to examine whether immanent critique has any place for *particular moral experiences* of injustice. The main claim that I want to defend is that particular moral experiences can play an indispensable role for immanent critiques of society, but that this role is essentially a negative one. Particular moral experiences can justify rejecting a dominant moral vocabulary, but as such they are insufficient for constructing an alternative.

I will briefly introduce the ideas of immanent critique (section “Immanent critique”) and of moral perception (section “Moral perception”) before discussing a “positive” and a “negativist” account of the role of moral perception for immanent critique, drawing on the accounts of John McDowell and Robert Brandom (sections “Moral experience as access to reasons” and “A negativist account of moral experience”). While Brandom’s negativist conception of experience forms a promising starting point, its integration into a social account requires radicalising its negative dimension (section “Radical negativism”) to arrive at a plausible conception of immanent critique (section “Negativist immanent critique”). Finally, I will discuss one major objection to the idea that subjective moral experiences could play a role in social critique (section “Discursive contestation”).

## Immanent critique

If we start by assuming, for the sake of the argument, that social critique consists in the application of general normative principles to particular cases, the most important question for social critique is how we can *justify* the principles that we use. At first glance, there seem to be two possible responses to this question: One option is to first find the principles by advancing an independent moral argument for why some particular principles (of justice or other) are justified and then, in a second step, apply them to particular practices. This “external” strategy is, more or less, the strategy pursued by *moral critiques* of social practices, as many examples of such critiques in the liberal tradition suggest.<sup>8</sup> A second “communitarian” or “internal” strategy does not rely on independently justified principles, but on the principles that the members of the relevant practice already accept. If we evaluate social practices using such principles, we adopt a more relativist or “internal” approach to critique that does not imply that there are any normative truths that are independent of the self-understanding of the members of the relevant social practice.<sup>9</sup>

Famously, not only Marx, but also many others in the tradition of critical theory claim that this alternative between “internal” and “external” critique is incomplete. There is a third option, namely immanent critique. When Marx – who inherited the idea of immanent critique from Hegel<sup>10</sup> – provides his classic formulation of this idea,<sup>11</sup> he proceeds from the assumption that we should not approach the world with ready-made principles that are then applied to reality “from the outside” without any regard to the particularity of the situation, but that we should try to find principles which are the principles *of* the social practices that we criticise but still transcend the present reality of these practices. In other words, immanent critique is a form of critique that applies *transformative* principles that are *immanent* to social reality.<sup>12</sup>

In the Marxist tradition, the paradigmatic example of such critique is, of course, a critique of capitalism that takes up the ideals of freedom and self-determination that are taken to be immanent ideals of capitalism. These ideals are then “applied” in the sense that Marxists try to show that capitalism structurally blocks their realisation, so that the only way in which a contradiction between reality and these ideals can be avoided is to abolish capitalism.

Such an approach seems to be suited for overcoming a picture of critique that understands itself mainly on the model of deductive normative reasoning. By reconstructing immanent normative principles as a part of reality, these immanent principles are not merely *applied* to reality in critique. Rather, the critique must be thought to *give expression* to an already existing conflict within a social practice.<sup>13</sup>

Two features of immanent critique are especially noteworthy: First, even though the relevant theories do not see critique as the application of independent moral principles, they nevertheless do not give up on the idea that critique addresses those at whom it is directed with reasons which are more than subjective preferences. On such a model, critical judgments are justified by making explicit a *conflict* between commitments immanent to a practice and that practice’s actual form, a conflict that reveals itself through experience of injustices.<sup>14</sup> The second feature is the *transformative* character of immanent critique, which distinguishes it from those forms of critical interventions that aim merely at the consistency or authenticity of social practices in a conservative sense. Immanent critique

presupposes that the only way in which an inconsistency between the current shape of a social practice and its implicit norms can be resolved requires transforming the practice into a different practice, i.e. a practice governed by different norms.<sup>15</sup> This kind of immanent method does not take the consistency of the social practice with some independently justified principles as the only aim of social critique. It, however, still reconstructs the activity of critique according to a *deductive pattern*. What primarily matters is to find the right *principles* which then need to be applied to the practice that is the object of critique. The only dispute appears to be about the method by which these principles are to be discovered. It thus seems as if this model of immanent critique does not constitute any improvement from the point of view of the more radical critics of principle-based normativity.

However, this characterisation is unfair: While it is correct to say that this picture still accords a central place to the idea of a *standard* (with which particular instances or tokens of a social practice can be evaluated), immanent critique goes beyond a model of deductive application. It assumes that the practice in question already can apply that kind of standard to itself, and that the critique itself only makes the resulting inconsistency *explicit*. But even given this concession, it still seems as if the generality of that which immanent critique reconstructs goes beyond the particular case and therefore is still caught up in a picture of normativity which privileges the general above the particular. In my view, this problem deserves a more thorough answer than has been provided so far by critical theorists.

## Moral experience

While there are various metaethical and phenomenological objections against the idea that morality is best conceived of as a system of general principles (for example, from within the Aristotelian tradition<sup>16</sup>), in the following sections I want to examine a *political* objection to a model of social critique that privileges the application of principles. This objection – an objection that has found some expression in Adorno’s critique of identity thinking, although the application to morality has remained implicit in his work to some degree<sup>17</sup> – starts from the observation that the very *form of generality* can have, as such, oppressive effects because the qualitative features of some particular case of injustice might not be adequately captured in terms of the violation of a principle. This is because the *meaning of principles* always depends on the linguistic framework from within which they are applied and formulated. If individual experiences of injustice are subsumed under principles that incorporate a dominant framework, certain dimensions of the meaning of these experiences for the individual will be lost, insofar as they do not conform to the presuppositions of that framework.

Axel Honneth has formulated one version of this objection against Habermas’s theory that – in his view – focuses on only on judgments within social discourses that have already been made explicit in moral terms. As Honneth argues, such a conception ignores the “situationally dependent, highly fragmentary social morality of the suppressed classes”.<sup>18</sup> While this fragmentary morality does not contain any “idea of a total moral order or projections of a just society”, and while it typically has not been abstracted “into a system of norms”,<sup>19</sup> it nevertheless points us negatively towards “hegemonically excluded possibilities of justice”.<sup>20</sup> In terms of an explanation, Honneth emphasises

social differences in regard to how much argumentative pressure the moral arguments made by members of different classes usually face in order to explain why lower-class morality does not necessarily take on the shape of a system of principles.

Of course, when Honneth discusses “moral experiences”, he does not refer to particular experiences in the sense of *individual* experiences (the qualities of which we might never be capable of fully communicating). He rather refers to *socially shared* experiences of the oppressed classes. These experiences are “particular” in the sense that they derive their moral significance from the social context in which they are made and not from their embedding into an explicitly articulated moral framework. Notwithstanding this extension, Honneth’s argument supports the more general argument to which I am referring: According to this argument, a theory of moral judgment that describes critique as the application of general principles is not neutral because it privileges the systematised conceptions of justice employed by dominant social classes. It follows that if we want to engage in a project of immanent critique that reconstructs normative potentials within social practices that are systematically excluded from becoming explicit, we might be able to do so only by overcoming the emphasis on the deductive model of reasoning.

On this line of reconstructing the objection against the principle-based approach in social critique, the primary focus must lie on *particular experiences* that resist (at some given point) full conceptualisation. Particular experiences are, in this context, defined as *non-inferential perceptions of reasons* that speak for or against having some sort of reactive attitude (such as indignation, resentment or admiration) in response to some event.

But if we do not understand such experiences as making it apparent to us that a phenomenon falls under a concept, how exactly should we understand them? And in what way could such experiences then serve as foundations for a critique that addresses others with the force of reasons? One suggestion is provided in Alessandro Ferrara’s work concerning the “force of the example”.<sup>21</sup> Ferrara’s argument proceeds from Kant’s discussion about forms of judgment in the *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant distinguishes between “determining” and “reflective” judgments.<sup>22</sup> Determining judgments subsume a particular under a universal concept, whereas reflective judgments find the universal for a given particular. Reflecting judgments thus start from the particular, but they nevertheless have a dimension of validity that transcends the particular case. The paradigmatic application is Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment: Even though we cannot point to a universal principle governing our aesthetic commendations, they still demand universal assent. For such judgments, it is thus the experience of a given particular as exemplary that allows us to form judgments that aspire to context-transcending validity. Ferrara ascribes to Kant the view that such a universalising movement is made possible by a “*sensus communis*” shared by rational agents.<sup>23</sup> He explains that this “*sensus communis*” is not to be understood in terms of the shared background of a life-world, nor is it a merely natural disposition. It should be understood rather as constituted by “a capacity to sense the flourishing of human life”.<sup>24</sup> Ferrara further develops this idea in terms of a theory of authenticity that includes the dimensions of coherence, vitality, depth and maturity.<sup>25</sup> One might paraphrase Ferrara by saying that an *existential interest* in the authenticity of one’s life is defining for human beings and thus enables them to form judgments about exemplary moral cases that are not based on general principles but on a perception of their analogy to the ideal of a flourishing human life. Building on that line of thought, Ferrara argues that, for example, Rawls’s theory of public reason as transcending particular

conceptions of the good could be made more plausible if it were to build on the normativity of the exemplary.

While Ferrara makes many compelling points, there are two reasons why I think his account cannot answer all the needs of a model of immanent critique. First, his account of normativity makes the notion of authenticity carry a lot of weight. While he is right that we can distinguish better from worse interpretations of our social practices according to how far these interpretations display the characteristics of authenticity (depth, coherence, etc.), it is not true that we always ought to adopt, for example, the most coherent interpretation of a social practice. The most coherent interpretation of a practice might indeed fail to make explicit deep conflicts that a better interpretation could capture.<sup>26</sup> For example, one might question whether the interpretation of the practices of the modern labour market that enables us to see it as based on a coherent moral outlook is indeed the most “authentic” interpretation in the sense that it captures the variety of ways in which participants in the labour market make sense of their situation – or whether it uncritically reproduces the perspective of dominant groups or ideologies. The second reason is that even his notion of the universal normative impact of exemplary perception still privileges the universal over the particular. The perception of some phenomenon is only significant within this model if it exemplifies something that, by definition, is more than what is contained in the particular case.

For these reasons, I will try to develop an alternative in the following sections by drawing on some contemporary accounts of experience. In particular, I want to develop two strategies – a “positive” and a “negative” strategy – for understanding the connection between particular moral experience and critique.

The purpose of the following discussion is best understood by contrasting the claim that there is such a thing as moral experience with a “standard model” of moral judgment. According to the standard model, when we make moral judgments we perceive a non-moral fact (for example, the perception of one person shooting at another), apply a general normative principle (e.g. that it is wrong to attempt to kill another person, save in self-defense) and infer a moral judgment from this combination (i.e. that the observed act is morally bad).<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, an account that gives the pride of place to particular moral experiences would have to conceive of such experiences as *directly* allowing non-inferential access to the moral features of what is observed. Such an account would have to claim that moral subjects either individually or (as Honneth suggests) collectively *directly perceive reasons* that speak for feeling moral indignation about an act. If such an account of moral experience were correct, an immanent critique of society could draw on the particular moral judgments of members of a community in a way that treats these, at least when they occur under favourable conditions, as reactions to reasons which are in some sense “there” in the world. If general moral principles are not the source of moral validity, but are instead seen as (potentially imperfect, potentially distorting) generalisations of reason-judgments, then we have a metaethical foundation for embracing Honneth’s argument that an immanent critique should not operate on the level of accepted principles, but rather on the level of particular moral experience.

Of course, the plausibility of this argument depends on whether we can make sense of the claim that there is non-inferential moral perception. There are two interpretations of this claim which are ruled out from the beginning as useless for a project of immanent



critique in the Frankfurt School tradition: The first such interpretation treats moral perception as not conceptually structured, as a “Given”.<sup>28</sup> Sellars and McDowell have attacked this idea successfully in relation to epistemology in general<sup>29</sup> – but the notion of “the Given” is also inappropriate for critical theory. Critical theories are typically opposed to the idea that there are brute perceptions of reasons which are not already formed by social discursive practices. Furthermore, if the “Given” is understood as something “natural” in the sense of being independent of and disconnected from a discursively constructed “social space of reasons”, a critique that would rely on it would no longer be an immanent critique of social practices in any case.

The second interpretation that critical theorists intuitively have reason to reject is one that sees moral experience as (conceptually contentful) experience of practice-independent moral facts (such as the irreducible wrongness of an action). Typically, views that endorse this interpretation are based on some form of strong moral realism. But if we understand judgments about social injustices as the reflection of a moral fact that exists independent from a given social practice of moral evaluation, this supports a form of particularist external critique, but clearly not *immanent* critique.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, in order to develop an account of immanent critique which accords a central role for particular moral experience, we need to have a model of experience available that sees it as the experience of something real, as conceptually contentful and as an experience which reflects not some practice-independent, “external” reality, but one which reflects *social* reality, that is, reality as made available to us by our social practices.

### **Moral experience as access to reasons**

One promising form of an account of moral experience that is both an experience of something within social reality, but still direct, particular moral experience that does not depend on moral principles is to be found in the work of John McDowell. According to McDowell, we should not understand the human capacity of perception as delivering us brute sensory givens, that is, non-conceptual impressions. We should rather understand this capacity as delivering the world to us as already conceptually structured. McDowell follows Aristotle when he claims that a “virtuous person”, that is, someone who is reliably motivated to act in a morally right way, is someone who is capable of seeing situations requiring certain kinds of action as directly reason-giving.<sup>31</sup> To introduce someone to the right way of acting therefore just means bringing him or her to see situations in some specific way and thereby developing his or her capacity to perceive reasons.<sup>32</sup>

The language of “perceiving reasons” depends on a broader conception of perception according to which our perceptive capacities are not “natural” in the sense of the natural sciences, but belong to a *second nature* into which we are socialised by education. Second nature also includes conceptual elements to which our natural capacities of perception allow us access. From this assumption, McDowell argues for an understanding of moral reality according to which this reality is neither characterisable independently of our (socially) formed capacities of perception (as traditional moral realists claim), nor as a mere projection (as noncognitivists claim). Rather, reality and perceptive capacities can be only made intelligible together.<sup>33</sup>

Even though it is not McDowell’s ambition to frame this argument in such a way as to be taken up by critical theories, it is still clear that it has potential for critical theories: we



can think of moral perception as making something that is “in the world” available to us, not as some brute fact but rather as a feature of the world which is only intelligible in terms of a moral outlook that is shaped by the “ethical formation” of our sensitivity. Although our moral sensitivity is a product of socialisation into our practice, it is possible, on that view that the norms that we have been socialised into are not perfectly captured by the explicit principles that people accept as part of their participation in the practice. In such a case, we could allow for the idea that (sometimes) our moral perception which is the outcome of our socialisation can bring us to judgment that unveils an immanent content of our social practices that is, at any given moment, inadequately captured by the accepted principles of that practice. On that basis, one can argue that “direct” moral experiences are less subject to social control than moral judgments that are based on the explicitly accepted principle, because they are one step removed from the discursive commitments that are obligatory within the social practice in question.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, there could be a form of immanent critique that reconstructs those reasons that people are able to perceive non-inferentially (due to their socialisation into a form of life) but which they are prevented from making explicit by a distorting conceptual framework.

The first steps towards developing McDowell’s metaethics into a more socialised (and critical) version can be seen in the work of Sabina Lovibond. Lovibond argues that “moral rationality rests upon a shared practice which is embodied in institutions”<sup>35</sup>, leading to the conclusion that moral judgments have two aspects. On the one hand, they represent moral facts as given. On the other hand, the particular way in which they (as exercises of second-natural capacities) represent these facts is an expression of a shared form of life that can then become subject to critical objections from the standpoint of a moral subject.

This account can be extended to an expressivist model of social critique: if the self-understanding of a community rests on certain moral principles and if the same community inculcates its members into a social practice that enables them to perceive moral injustices that cannot be adequately captured as violations of these principles, such a practice suffers from an *immanent contradiction*.<sup>36</sup> Such a practice would not be self-contradictory in the sense that it would require people to adopt contradictory principles, but in the sense that the moral sensitivity that it cultivates would systematically undermine the explicit principles. If critics that perceive this problem can show this mismatch is not an unhappy accident, but rather a systematic feature of that practice, they have found a reason for arguing for a fundamental transformation of that practice. Such an argument for the transformation would not be based on some insight into absolute “moral facts”, but would also amount to more than just a demand for mere consistency on the level of explicit principles.

While there is some reason to be optimistic about the prospect for developing a theory of immanent critique that takes moral experience to be a central component, there are difficulties with McDowell’s assumptions about second nature that put that whole enterprise into question. As Robert Pippin notes,<sup>37</sup> the whole idea of second nature is relatively idle in the actual explanations of what goes on in moral judgments. McDowell does not want to claim that there is anything about our biological nature that predetermines the way we ought to develop or exercise our conceptual perceptiveness. Rather, it belongs to our second nature to be able to step back from any conception of what might be natural for human beings to do and subject that conception to critical scrutiny,<sup>38</sup> even though we can never step completely outside of the practice of perceiving certain

considerations as reasons. But what then keeps us from dropping the talk about second nature? What keeps us from understanding our perceptual sensitivity as solely shaped by our commitment to certain norms and standards into which we are socialised historically? Such a heightened constructivist picture of normative experience also allows us to better comprehend the normative force of our moral experience. According to Pippin, Hegel follows Kant in endorsing a view about normativity which holds that we can only be obligated through considerations we have previously accepted as being obligatory for us<sup>39</sup> – in effect, all moral bindingness must be understood as the product of self-legislation.<sup>40</sup> Of course, McDowell can respond to this objection by stating that this leads us back into a kind of subjectivism which is untenable – do not we have to understand self-legislation of specific principles, again, as reflecting particular reasons which are, in some sense, *there*?<sup>41</sup> But this rejoinder is not the end of the debate: Of course, a Hegelian can claim that we are never in the situation of having to pull principles out of thin air, just as McDowell himself holds. We are always already members of specific cultural and historical communities. As such, we are committed to principles which determine what counts as a reason upon which we can reasonably rely in considering how we ought to change our normative commitments.

### A negativist account of moral experience

If we want to defend the importance of moral experience for social critique and if we also want to avoid an unclear notion of “second nature”, we might therefore be attracted to the Hegelian picture of moral experience as the exercise of a capacity to skilfully apply normative standards in perception that are determined by a historical form of life. But on this model, judgments again seem intelligible only as (perhaps implicit, habitual) applications of principles. It is unclear if such an account can answer the more radical objection posed by those who think that general principles *as such* are unable to do justice to the specificity of the particular.

Taking up this deep-going scepticism about normativity, one could radicalise Honneth’s original objection in the direction of a critique that Sabina Lovibond calls a “determinate critique of ethical formation”.<sup>42</sup> What if not only the specific explicit vocabulary or discursive framework of a society is to be seen as a vehicle of domination, but also those forms of socialisation that train us to habitually subsume our particular experiences under concepts? If we radicalise the objection in this way, we can no longer contrast the “explicit” framework with “implicit” social norms, rather we move towards a general scepticism about the *social institution of normativity itself*.

This line of argument further presses us to focus on the question whether there is something in individual moral experience that is not subsumed by social normativity. But the McDowell discussion seems to show that one can only answer this question affirmatively if one either commits oneself to a form of moral realism that denies the social nature of such experience or if one remains unclear about what it exactly is (outside of the historical-social norms) that constrains one’s judgments about reasons.

There is a way out of this dilemma: we can retain a positive role for social normativity *and* we can give a prominent role to particular moral experience. The key to a solution can be found in Hegel’s concept of experience as Robert Brandom has reconstructed it. Brandom ascribes to Hegel the view that the particularity of experience can never be

fully captured by judgments.<sup>43</sup> This is not only because experience is *too rich* to be fully described by any finite set of conceptual judgments. Brandom – who understands concepts, following Kant, on the model of rules – argues that if one uses a concept, one thereby has to accept being bound by rules regarding the consequences and preconditions of its application. If one describes something as a dog, one is committed to also accepting a description of it as a mammal as well as to not accepting a description of it as a bird, due to the fact that such relations of inference and incompatibility constitute the content of this concept. In virtue of this feature, it is not only the case that *judgments* can turn out to be *wrong* or incomplete, *concepts* can also turn out to be *mistaken*. This happens whenever a person (or group) discovers that all conditions for the application of a concept are fulfilled, but that the results of some inferences allowed by this application (to the permissibility of which one has committed oneself to by using the concept) are incompatible with commitments that the subject is already, at the same time, non-inferentially disposed to undertake.<sup>44</sup>

A consequence from this line of thought is that our grasp on the world is not just determined by the sets of judgments we assent to but also by the set of concepts we use. Both sets can evolve over time in response to particular experiences: not only can I discover that what I thought was my neighbour's dog, is in reality her cat, I can also discover that a concept like “dog” – or (to pick more plausible examples) “real woman” or “intrinsic talent” – is a concept that is, as such, mistaken.<sup>45</sup>

This suggests a more complicated relation between general rules or principles and particular experiences. Moral judgments can now be seen as applications of principles to particular cases, insofar as they are conceptual. Describing an action as “negligent” or “cruel” subsumes a particular case under a general concept. Nevertheless, particular experience still can simultaneously play a critical role insofar it can contradict and shape the concepts that we use in such descriptions. As long as we are capable of applying some concepts (like “despicable” or “morally repulsive”) both inferentially and non-inferentially, their non-inferential applications can come into conflict with the inferences we take ourselves to be justified to draw from other conceptual judgments. Imagine that our community uses a concept of “unmanliness” such that it is part of the meaning of that term that one can infer from the judgment that some action is unmanly that it is despicable. If a critic then presents us with a narrative in which some actions clearly fulfil the preconditions for calling them unmanly but in which they nevertheless elicit in adequately socialised observers the non-inferential judgment that they are commendable, this conflict might reasonably lead one to question that concept of unmanliness to the point where it can be seen that it does not serve any useful purpose.

But not only does this model allow a role for both general rules (in the shape of moral concepts) *and* for perception, it also solves the dilemma between either having to introduce an unexplained notion of naturalness (in “second nature”) or having to retreat back to an idea of “spirit” as an exclusively social process of norm-governance that is not “in touch with” a more objective reality. On the Brandomian picture we can understand the evolution of our moral concepts and our moral sensitivity as running in parallel. Our concepts then are to be understood as rules where the content of these rules is determined by a social practice of norm-governance that necessitates a process of socialising practice members in such a way that they acquire the capacity to apply the relevant concepts reliably in a non-inferential manner. This equips them with a “second nature” or

habitual dispositions to apply concepts. On the one hand, this second nature is *natural* in an ordinary sense insofar that any disposition to react to some circumstances with the propensity to apply a moral concept non-inferentially is always dependent on emotions and affects as well as on distinctive way in which certain situations directly affect human reactions. This critical Aristotelian point argues that the “natural” basis on which our moral capacities depend is not best described as an infinitely flexible material for social formation without needing to understand that basis as something static or fixed. On the other hand, one can also argue in a more Marxist spirit that the “nature” (in a more figurative sense) of certain forms of social cooperation and community (as, for example, the communities that develop around practices of work) makes them exhibit dynamics which are also not completely available to social control (as, in the ideal case, they tend to generate certain kinds of solidarity and friendship even if this is not supported by the relevant normative self-understanding). This dynamics would then also shape the moral sensibility of individuals. On both interpretations, the “second nature” in question is not completely available to social formation as it puts up (more or less) resistance to norms that demand particular judgments.<sup>46</sup> While this idea is certainly not yet well developed, we can imagine that one could defend a form of immanent critique that draws on these experiences of unavailability. To mention just one example, even though most moral systems necessitate some form of punitive sanctioning, it seems as though no moral system is capable of avoiding cases in which such sanctions that are inferentially legitimated by the relevant principles are nevertheless *non-inferentially* judged by some spectators as unjust or cruel. In those cases, even though these spectators fully believe in the appropriateness of the set of moral concepts of their community and even though they are successfully socialised into the second nature needed to apply these concepts successfully, they still cannot bring themselves to change their non-inferential judgments to the effect that the sanctions are appropriate.<sup>47</sup> In such cases, the “natural” part of second nature, even though it does not make any reasons directly available and even though it does not provide us with any justification to subsume a given case under some concept, nevertheless delivers an insight through immediate receptivity which constrains our judgments and which might show that a given set of moral concepts is defective: because those who have the second nature best suited to apply these concepts cannot apply them without running into contradictions between the commitments they arrive at inferentially and non-inferentially, such a set of concepts can be shown by experience to be in need for revision. To take the example cited above, even if those who are most competent in the application of the concept of “unmanliness” in some society and who have been so successfully socialised into the relevant sensibilities to fulfil the ideals of the society of question, cannot avoid a fragmentation of their judgments, critics can use this as a basis for an attack on such a concept.

This leads to a model of immanent critique where we neither have to assume completely external constraints on systems of norms as a foundation for critique nor do we have to restrict ourselves to internal contradictions within socially instituted normative systems. Rather, such a model can take up that the individual, particular basis of socialisation idea can exhibit a kind of recalcitrance towards social determination which makes us reasons available.

Finally, this line of thought can also answer the radicalised form of Honneth’s objection: If we assume that not only the explicit vocabulary and the explicit moral principles

of a society can serve as a vehicle of class, gender or racial domination, but also that the *very idea* of socialisation into a system of norms is a disciplinary enterprise, then we can reconstruct, out of Hegel's philosophy, a concept of moral experience which sees immediate moral perception as potentially subverting, disrupting, or disturbing such practices of discipline.

## Radical negativism

In spite of these benefits, such a negativist account of experience is still insufficient. In Brandom's theory, experience plays the role of a merely *external constraint* on our reasoning process.<sup>48</sup> As Brandom argues in the case of non-moral experience, the deliverances of sensibility should be understood as reliable causal dispositions to form non-inferential judgments without them allowing us, in McDowell's sense, direct access to reasons. Even though experience plays a constraining role for our conceptual reasoning, it does not follow that perception or experience makes us conceptual or reason-giving content available.

The significance of this claim for a theory of morality can best be seen when we compare a Brandomian negativist view of moral perception with that of Adorno. Adorno subscribes to a number of views that at first make him seem like a natural ally of Brandom.<sup>49</sup> Adorno claims that there is something like direct, even physical moral experience.<sup>50</sup> In particular, he argues that feelings of moral repulsion, in particular the identification with the bodily suffering of others, cannot be replaced by forms of reasoning that proceed deductively, since the introduction of general principles will undermine or negate such impulsive reactions to morality.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Adorno thinks that moral experience does not make any positive moral values or principles accessible (at least not under current social conditions).<sup>52</sup> While moral experience allows us access to the wrongness of situations and thus encourages resistance, it does not allow us to derive any picture of what it would be like to live in a morally right way. At times, Adorno seems to go even further by claiming not only that moral experience can serve as a corrective to our conceptual frameworks, but even that *any* such framework must be intrinsically so defective (at least under current conditions), that we would do better *without concepts in morality at all*.<sup>53</sup> However, the passages where Adorno seemingly makes such suggestions do not give us the full picture.<sup>54</sup> While he is clearly a critic of the deductive model of moral reasoning, he nevertheless does not go to the other extreme of advocating unreflective reliance on non-inferential judgments. He acknowledges that our second nature is formed by the same social processes of domination<sup>55</sup> that are reflected in the dominant form of reason. Thus, we cannot trust our non-inferential judgments; rather, we need to subject them to reflection in order to see whether they are an expression of an insight that has been illegitimately excluded from the discursive realm.<sup>56</sup>

Adorno therefore assigns moral experience a role within a *dialectic* between conceptual thought and particular experience. This role cannot be reduced to that of a causal constraint on an otherwise self-governing practice of concept application. Not only must we evaluate the reliability of our dispositions to apply concepts from within the structure of conceptual commitments that we already have (as Brandom acknowledges),<sup>57</sup> we must also see experience as drawing our attention to that which is not appropriately represented by our current conceptual framework. Such a dialectics between concept and experience<sup>58</sup>

is therefore only possible if we assume that our moral experiences are more than just causal dispositions to apply concepts. We can only make sense of the idea that such experiences give us reasons (not only reasons to act, but also reasons to revise our judgments and the structure of our concepts) if we assume that what is made available through experiences has a minimal conceptual content. That means that an experience of this type, in terms of its conceptual content, must be seen as incompatible with some more general principle under which we could subsume it. What we perceive in those cases where we have perception-based reasons for concept revision is the *inappropriateness* of applying some concept or principle to a situation, that is, a *defeasible reason* to revise the concept. The reason is defeasible since it can turn out, on further reflection, that our perception is an actualisation of some aspect of our second nature that we cannot endorse, given other justified moral commitments that we have.

Building on this idea, one can understand Adorno to be at least implicitly committed to a *negativist conception of moral experiences*, according to which such experiences allow us to perceive not only that something ought not to happen (this is the paradigmatic case that Adorno seems to have in mind), but also that some given phenomenon cannot be subsumed under a concept.

### Negativist immanent critique

To return to the issue of critique, this negativist conception of experience allows us to reformulate the idea of immanent critique to accommodate a radical critique of ethical formation.

Such a radical model of immanent critique extends the experience-based model that builds on McDowell's account. This latter model was said to rely on the non-inferential experiences of injustice which members of oppressed groups are capable of making in virtue of their second nature. Immanent critique could then be said to be making explicit a conflict between these experiences and the explicit norms of justice in society.

On the extended picture, such a conflict between implicit morality and explicit principles is not the only relevant starting point for critique. Rather, we can now also see particular experiences of injustice as being potentially in conflict with an encompassing morality that covers *both* explicit principles and implicit, second-natural capacities to apply concepts. If it turns out that particular moral experiences, especially the experiences of injustice of oppressed groups, cannot be integrated into the combination of the rules governing the inferential use of concepts that are dominant in some social setting and the non-inferential dispositions that people acquire to apply such concepts, then we could say that the second nature that is constitutive for the practice of the relevant society is *fragmented*.<sup>59</sup> Immanent critique can take such fragmentation as a starting point for a critique of the morality of a society in general.

Recalcitrant experiences of injustice should be taken seriously as a way to achieve insight into the inadequacy of our moral categories to the "material" without assuming that we thereby already gain insight into what particular moral categories would be better. Moreover, this picture does not set one kind of normativity (the principle-based, explicit normativity of discursive justification) against another kind (the normativity of implicit, practical knowledge) to then suggest that one of them is less likely to be a vehicle of social domination. It rather suggests that the recalcitrance of subjective or



social experience<sup>60</sup> towards integration into a system of principles, be they explicit or implicit, could be a source of moral insight that cannot be silenced.

While this revision does not adopt the celebratory attitude towards socially instituted normativity that is criticised by Lovibond, it also does not commit the opposite mistake: it does not claim that “brute” dispositions to make normative judgments have significance independently of their embedding into the “space of reasons”. While we might never be able to fully capture the insights that are directly made available by the recalcitrance of moral experience, any claim that they can justify a critique of our moral practices must always be *vindicated by argument* in order to justify a revision of our conceptual framework. Nevertheless, one can preserve Adorno’s idea that there is something within the immediate experience of human beings that resists domination, by arguing that our feeling of repulsion caused by certain acts is something that is always at least a *prima facie* reason to revise any moral framework that does not account for its force.

This means that, as long as we cannot argue that some morally inadequate feature of our moral upbringing has caused us to have such a reaction, it constitutes an objection against our moral concepts. We do not have to take the immediate experiences of a racist seriously, as long as we can describe them as a pathological consequence of a morally deficient upbringing. But it is much harder to say what morally bad feature of our upbringing is to blame for the impulsive moral repulsion people feel when they see laboratory animals suffering (even for the best purposes) or when they imagine the slow decay of a convicted murderer in jail. Even though they are perhaps unable to say what substantial moral judgments are justified by those reactions, the fact that many people cannot easily dismiss them, even on reflection, tells them something about the need for a revision of our moral concepts. Of course, whether perceptions have this status will often be contested, and any such claims have to be defended against objections. Nevertheless, the idea that moral perception *can* have this significance introduces new considerations that are inadequately captured on other models of critique.

## Discursive contestation

The discussion of epistemic experience so far has focused on the question of what exactly immanent critique reconstructs. The answer suggested to this question is that immanent critique reconstructs a potential that is immanent in moral experiences of injustice, and more particularly, in those experiences which resist conceptualisation in a dominant framework.

Examining Ferrara’s concept of exemplary validity, Maeve Cooke raises the question of how moral experiences can support the validity of ethical arguments.<sup>61</sup> Because moral experiences are *subjective* experiences, they are not necessarily shared by all members of a social practice. Furthermore, if they are *negative* experiences of the type described so far, their content cannot be made explicit in terms of reasons or concepts. Therefore, it seems that although such experiences may allow *individuals* to see the need to revise the conceptual structure of collective moral discourse, they can never play any function in *justifying* public claims for social change. If this claim were true, the concept of negative moral experience would be useless for a reconstruction of immanent critique.

This is an important objection that deserves a response. In order to answer it, one could be drawn to the Habermasian argument that normative validity is not a *presupposition*, but



a *result* of communicative practices. But this is problematic. If the subject matter of the critique is the conceptual framework itself that is dominant in some specific practice and if the claim advanced by the critique is that this framework is unable to capture the features of particular experiences of injustice, then it seems inappropriate to demand that *this* claim should be communicatively redeemed on the basis of an agreed-upon background of normative and descriptive classifications. In other words, this picture seems to shift the argumentative burden to those whose moral sensibilities turn out to be fragmented, whose experience resists subsumption under the concepts of a dominant discursive practice.

This dilemma is well-known in regard to whether a model of deliberative democracy that builds on Habermas's theory of communication is indeed as open to contestation as it claims to be, as long as the experiences of minority groups which cannot be adequately represented in a dominant linguistic framework are only ascribed normative significance as far they succeed in translating these experiences into the concepts of that framework.<sup>62</sup>

In Habermas's theory, the redemption of validity claims presupposes a communicatively rationalised lifeworld, that is, the coming together of a cultural framework, structures of personality and institutions in such a way that all these elements are reproduced through communication themselves.<sup>63</sup> While he, of course, acknowledges that any element of the lifeworld can become thematic in critical discourses, he does not have many theoretical tools to conceive of the structure of the lifeworld *as such* as an object of social conflict.

This means that not only the colonisation of the lifeworld, but already the communicative constitution of the *uncolonised* lifeworld itself can be a source of domination. This is the case when the conceptual frameworks through which the lifeworld can become thematic are supported and reproduced by social practices that exclude certain challenges. In particular, it is the case when these social practices do not allow for negative, particular experience to function as a source of justification for the resistance against the socialisation into that lifeworld. If this is true, we can criticise such a lifeworld on the basis that it systematically isolates itself against the negative force of moral perceptions. This argument presupposes a distinction between two different ways in which lifeworlds can be constituted: *rigid lifeworlds* allow for the thematisation of any of their elements *only* through communicable arguments offered in the language of the dominant conceptual framework, whereas *open lifeworlds* ascribe a *default justification* to particular experiences of moral negativity (or, rather, a *standard authority* to the subjects of such experience) which, even though it must be reflectively examined, does not need to be supported by communicable arguments in order to justify the demand that some part of the conceptual framework should become thematic.

On such a reinterpretation of the relation between lifeworld and critique, we can come to see the lifeworld as a sphere of social conflict. In the lifeworld, there are not only conflicts between dominant and subordinate forms of morality, but conflict can also exist between experiential capacities and those conceptual frameworks that remain dominant by denying the subjects countervailing experiences any means to express such experiences.

A critique that aims at reconstructing such experiences indeed faces the problem that the justification for the rejection of a dominant conceptual framework must by definition remain impossible to communicate within that framework. However, this does not mean that such

resistance cannot play any role at all in practices of public justification, at least when we assume that people can be *recognised* in such practices not only as discursive subjects but also as *moral perceivers*, as persons whose affective deliverances deserve to be treated as a *prima facie* justification for critique. Not only is it the case that such more open practices are practices in which there can be public discourse about experience or rather, about the conditions of possibility of those experiences that cannot be integrated, the question of how open our practices should be or how far we ought to recognise recalcitrant experiences is itself a question to which social critique has to pay attention.

## Conclusion

How is the theory of immanent critique impacted if it incorporates a negativist model of experience? First, it remains a model of *immanent* critique as long as it treats the capacity of persons to directly perceive (negative) reasons neither as a “brute”, non-socially formed capacity nor as access to transcendental, universal principles, but treats it as an ability to resist formation that is produced and constituted by social practices itself. Second, it remains a *radically reflexive* model of critique as long as experiences of injustice are not treated as a “pure given” but as entry points into a debate about justification in which both the particular and the universal, both the subjective and the communicable play a mutually correcting role. Third, such an extended account differs from more traditional accounts of immanent critique as far as it does not presuppose that immanent critique reconstructs principles that lie dormant or hidden in our social practices. The experiential source of critique can play an exclusively negative role that leaves open the question of what the critique should aim at. Such a model of critique would neither recommend to completely reject principles as a form of normativity completely, nor would it give up on the idea of communicative redemption of validity claims. But it would still take the particularist objection to principle-based morality seriously.

As the last fifty years of critical theorising have shown, the general and the universal cannot be only a vehicle for class domination, but also for gendered and neo-colonial oppression. Of course, in each particular case, we might *eventually* be able to reconstruct positive principles of justice that are adequate for overcoming such forms of oppression. But the fact that we can never rule out that there are, yet unrecognised moral experiences that are made invisible by our conceptual frameworks, gives us good reason to adopt a conception of critique which treats negative moral experience as an indicator of social conflict and potential moral wrongness.<sup>64</sup>

## Notes

1. Marx, “On the Jewish Question”; Brudney, *Marx’ Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, 337ff.
2. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*; Lukács, “On the Poverty of Spirit”; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.
3. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*.
4. O’Connor, *Adorno*, 75–82.
5. See Taylor, “Normativity and Normalization”; Schaff, “Agency and Institutional Rationality Foucault’s Critique of Normativity”; Vogelmann, “Measuring, Disrupting, Emancipating: Three Pictures of Critique”.

6. To just name a few: Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*; Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure*; Ferrara, *The Force of the Example*.
7. Deranty, "Injustice, Violence and Social Struggle."
8. I have developed this distinction in Stahl, *Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*, chap. 1. See also Jaeggi, "Was Ist Ideologiekritik?"; Honneth, "Reconstructive Social Critique with a Genealogical Reservation"; Kauppinen, "Reason, Recognition, and Internal Critique."
9. This model is paradigmatically represented by Michael Walzer (Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*).
10. Finlayson, "Hegel, Adorno and the Origins of Immanent Criticism."
11. Marx, *Early Writings*, 208f.
12. Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society*, 42.
13. On expressive criticism, see also Stahl, "Ideologiekritik als Kritik sozialer Praktiken."
14. Jaeggi, "Was Ist Ideologiekritik?"; Stahl, *Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*.
15. Jaeggi, "Was Ist Ideologiekritik?"
16. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*; McDowell, "Virtue and Reason."
17. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 272; Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 90; O'Connor, *Adorno*, chap. 5; Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 187ff.
18. Honneth, "Moral Consciousness and Class Domination," 83.
19. *Ibid.*, 84.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Ferrara, *The Force of the Example*.
22. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 67 (V:179).
23. It is unclear, however, whether Kant really thought that the assumption of a "sensus communis" is sufficient to explain the normative aspirations of reflexive judgments. See for example Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, 126.
24. Ferrara, *The Force of the Example*, 31, see also 60.
25. *Ibid.*, 32.
26. Stahl, *Immanente Kritik. Elemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken*, 83.
27. Audi, *Moral Perception*, 52; Zimmerman, *Moral Epistemology*, 18ff. See also Audi, "The Axiology of Moral Experience."
28. What Sellars (*Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*) attacks as the "myth of the Given" is the idea that our sensibility enables us to have cognitive states that have epistemic significance independent of their being embedded into relations of justification to other such states and that these states nevertheless make reasons for further beliefs available. Sellars argues that this is inconsistent and that experience can only form a "tribunal" for our judgments if it is conceptual and therefore embedded into a "logical space of reasons".
29. McDowell, *Mind and World*.
30. For a contemporary particularist account see Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*.
31. McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 189.
32. *Ibid.*, 191.
33. McDowell, "Projection and Truth in Ethics," 166.
34. Of course, if one assumes – as for example Habermas does – that the lifeworld background that we get acquainted with during our socialization processes is itself reproduced by discourses, then there is not the necessary independence of socialization from discursive domination to make this argument.
35. Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, 82.
36. One might think that these conditions are fulfilled only in the very specific case of social practices.
37. Pippin, "Leaving Nature behind: or two Cheers for 'Subjectivism'."
38. McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 172, 188.
39. See Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*.
40. See also Stern, "Freedom, Self-Legislation and Morality in Kant and Hegel."

41. McDowell, "Responses," 276. See also Testa, "Criticism from Within Nature," 486.
42. Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*, 131ff.
43. Brandom, "Sketch of a Program," 136.
44. Brandom illustrates this with an example from non-moral experience:

Thus, if I have a concept acid\* that is determinate in having as modally robust conditions of application that if something tastes sour then it is an acid\*, and as modally robust consequences of application that if something is an acid\* then it will turn Litmus paper red, I can be led by the immediate deliverances of sense (judgments I find myself with responsively, noninferentially) to commitments that are incompatible by my own lights if I run across a liquid that tastes sour but turns Litmus paper blue. In the context of the hypothesized commitments, the world is then telling me that I cannot have the concept acid\* with the exclusions and entailments I started out with (Ibid., 141.).

45. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, 125f.
46. Of course, whether there is indeed something in our moral sensibilities or in our forms of cooperation that is capable of resisting the formation by socialization, is an open question which would require much more discussion. At this point, I am only concerned with the consequences following from such assumptions for our picture of social critique.
47. One could see this as a more radical version of Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone*.
48. Brandom, "Non-Inferential Knowledge, Perceptual Experience, and Secondary Qualities"; Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, chap. 4.
49. On the connection between Brandom and Adorno, see also Bernstein, *Adorno*, 354.
50. Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society*, 43. For example, O'Connor writes "It is through the body that we experience what is morally objectionable" (O'Connor, *Adorno*, 139.).
51. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 286; Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 188; Bernstein, *Adorno*, 341.
52. Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 215.
53. O'Connor, *Adorno*, 142.
54. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 110; Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 194; Bernstein, *Adorno*, 244.
55. Bernstein, *Adorno*, 343.
56. Adorno writes, for example: "It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces" (*Minima Moralia*, 63.).
57. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, 306ff.
58. For Adorno, this also forms an immanent goal of that process, see

It emerges here when Kant finally does concede that the world would be a hell if it were not possible to achieve – and were it only in a transcendental realm – something like a unity of reason and the impulses it has suppressed. (Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 72.)

59. On fragmented nature, see Testa, "Verkörperte Freiheit. Erste Natur, Zweite Natur und Fragmentierung"; Testa, "Criticism from within Nature," 486.
60. Adorno often mentions the experience of familial love in early childhood as one of the shaping factors of experience that resists conceptualization. See Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 177.
61. See Maeve Cooke in this issue of *Critical Horizons*.
62. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*; Healy, "Rethinking Deliberative Democracy"; Benhabib, "The Utopian Dimension in Communicative Ethics."
63. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2:145.

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