

Practical Understanding, Rationality, and Social Critique

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Intended for S. Bacin and C. Bagnoli (eds.). *Reason, Agency and Ethics*, Oxford University Press.

Draft of 3/12/22

In this essay, I will outline a novel strategy for using constitutivist ideas from Kantian metaethics to critique social practices and institutions. In doing so, I do not mean to defend this model of critique as the *only* viable form of social and political critique, even within a Kantian framework – nor, indeed, as always the most appropriate. But I hope to show that it provides us with a form of critique that allows us to (i) develop a *robust* critique of many social practices (ii) on *both* epistemic *and* practical grounds, while nonetheless (iii) beginning from a perspective that is, in some sense, *internal* – or better, *immanent* – to the practice in question. Thus, if we are looking for a form of social critique that is neither *purely epistemic* nor *merely external* – which, in other words, allows us to critique social practices on something like their own terms as practically irrational – this method should be attractive for philosophers with Kantian (or post-Kantian) sympathies.

At the heart of this conception of critique lies in the idea that social practices may be thought of as *attempts at (some form of) collective practical understanding*. As I will explain more below, this way of thinking about the rationality of social practices may be seen as the product of applying a general (post-Kantian) model of rationality, which I have developed elsewhere, to the rationality of social collectives or practices. More precisely, I have recently argued that, within a Kantian framework, theoretical and practical rationality can be helpfully thought of as constitutively aiming at *theoretical and practical understanding* (respectively).¹ On this way of thinking about rationality, the constitutive aim of theoretical rationality lies in *theoretical understanding* – that is, an understanding of *what is* which is appropriately responsive to the facts. Similarly, on this picture, practical rationality constitutively aims at *practical understanding* or wisdom – that is, an understanding of *what ought to be* that makes its objects actual through *action*. In this way, in this work, I have tried to show that we can develop a unified, and deeply Kantian, conception of reason or rationality by seeing each of rationality's main manifestations as aiming at its own distinctive form of understanding. And I have tried to show how this can be leveraged to explain many of the distinctive requirements of rationality in both the theoretical and practical spheres, including a version of the *principle of sufficient reason* and Kant's various formulations of the *moral law*.² So, if I'm right, this model of rationality sits at the very heart of Kant's critical project.³

The account of the rationality of social practices I develop below may be thought of as introducing a more explicitly social version of the resulting conception of rational critique. As such it may be viewed as bringing the sort of (often only *implicitly* social) constitutivism about rationality, which I find in Kant, into a more *explicitly* social domain. But while my previous work on Kant's conception of reason sits in the background of this project, I hope that what follows will be attractive, even if read in isolation from that work.

In particular, in what follows, I will argue that given a plausible conception of the nature of social practices, such practices can be seen as constitutively aiming at *forms of collective practical understanding*. Thus, via a form of constitutivism about such practices, we can extract from their very nature a basic conception of rationality that is immanent to them as such. On this conception of rationality, the success of any social practice depends essentially on its ability to provide itself with a certain sort of collective practical understanding. Thus, I will argue that the resulting link between social practices and collective practical understanding – together with plausible requirements on such understanding – provides us with the

¹ REDACTED.

² REDACTED.

³ REDACTED.

foundation for a form of social critique that is surprisingly robust in its critical power, while also being *immanent* to the practices being criticized in an important and non-trivial sense. By doing so, I hope to show that, once transposed into a more explicitly social and political domain, the Kantian conception of rationality I have defended elsewhere provides us with the basis for a powerful form of social critique.

1. The Project of Rational Social Critique

So suppose we are considering some social practice or institution. This might be something as grand as neoliberal capitalism or something as specific in time and place as the National Football League.⁴ There are many questions we might ask about such practices and institutions. But one of the most natural, at least for philosophers of a certain bent, is the following: How is it possible to criticize such practices as irrational – or, at least, as less than fully rational?⁵

As I will understand it here, this is the central question underlying the project of social and political critique. But, of course, the nature of this question will depend greatly on how we understand its reference to “rationality”. For example, if “being rational” is defined, as it sometimes is today, in terms of being properly responsive to the objective values and reasons (whatever these are) – then there will be no special mystery about how rational critique is possible.⁶ For if this is what we mean by “rationality”, any social practice or way of life that is not properly responsive to what objectively matters will count as less than fully rational simply in virtue of this fact. *But*, of course, “rational critique” in this sense is so easy to come by simply because it proceeds from a standpoint that is external to the social practice or way of life being criticized.

Now, I have no desire to argue against the legitimacy of this sort “external critique” here. Indeed, in many cases, the most important point to make against some social practice is that it flies in the face of something that is objectively of great importance. In such cases, those engaged in critique should of course feel free draw on substantive moral or political judgments, whether or not those judgments are in any sense “implicit” in or “immanent” to the social practices being criticized.⁷ And yet, while I agree that “external critique” in this sense is often the most appropriate response to a problematic social practice, I *also* think we should acknowledge that criticism of this external sort carries with it limitations of both a practical and a

⁴ Compare Haslanger(2017)’s discussion of social practices and structures and Jaeggi(2013)’s discuss of the possibility of critiquing “forms of social life”, both of which are highly influential for what follows. I’ll return to both of their accounts shortly in more detail.

⁵ I take this question from the Jaeggi(2013). Note that, for the sake of brevity, I’ll often refer to social practices and institutions simply as “social practices”.

⁶ Setting aside, of course, any background metaethical concerns about the possibility or accessibility of objective values and reasons.

⁷ See the defense of this sort of critique in Haslanger(2017), and compare Haslanger(2012). I should note that while Haslanger(2017) is most interested in forms of critique that are “external” in this sense, elsewhere she indicates a more ambivalent attitude towards this question (which fits well with my approach here):

In my papers on this issue (Ch. 15, Ch. 17), I waffle considerably on how we should pursue critique across ideological frames. In some cases, I think, we can only achieve external critique. But, as indicated above, in practice there are reasons to work for immanent critique, or critique relative to a common ground shared by those engaged in the dispute. How can we establish a common ground, or shared context of assessment, across ideological differences, specifically one that is adequate to demonstrate the defectiveness of a concept? I suggest that in some circumstances one context of assessment might be better than another, e.g., more objective, more reliable, more politically acute, etc. In such a case the external critique from that context would be justified and, one might argue, even those not situated in that context have reasons to embrace its results. (Haslanger 2014, 26)

philosophical sort.⁸ Practically speaking, its main limitation is that there is no reason to expect it to resonate with those it is addressed to. Thus, if our aim is not merely to condemn the practice we are criticizing, but also to change the minds of its participants, wholly external criticism is often poorly suited to this task.⁹ But such concerns are not *merely* practical in character. For they point to a more general concern – namely, that the practice of external critique might *itself* not always stand up to rational scrutiny. For example, insofar as this mode of critique begins by siding with our own values and norms over the values and norms of those we are criticizing, it *might* (at least in some cases) seem to embody an attitude towards those who differ from us that is somehow arbitrary, dogmatic, or paternalistic. And this might seem to open the practice of external criticism itself up to a variety of forms of rational critique – on, say, genealogical, epistemological, or ethical grounds.

As already noted, I don't view these concerns as fatal in principle to the practice of external critique.¹⁰ But acknowledging that fact does not mean that we should not *also* acknowledge the philosophical and practical attractions of forms of critique that proceed from perspectives that are (in some sense) more "internal" or "immanent" to the practices or ways of life being critiqued.¹¹ Especially from a broadly Kantian point of view, like the one I will develop here, such "more internal" modes of critique might be motivated by a concern to properly take the perspective of those being critiqued into account in our critique of them. In purely external forms of critique, criticism is fundamentally a matter of reasoning *about* the persons and practices being criticized. Immanent critique, on the other hand, is motivated by a concern, not simply to reason about the subjects of critique, but to also *reason with them* or (perhaps better) to *bring them into a position from which we can reason together* about some issue.¹² In other words, in developing an immanent form of critique, we are attempting to develop criticisms that could be appreciated by those we are criticizing, at least insofar as they are willing to join with us in reasoning and reflecting on their own social practices and their implications and limitations.¹³ In this way, immanent critique aims – not at a third-personal understanding of some social practice and its flaws – but rather, at a form of understanding that is shared between the critics and those being critiqued. In this way, much like Kant's own conception of critique, immanent critique aims to raise the sources of dissatisfaction that are already present within some practice to the level of explicit self-consciousness.

⁸ Again, Haslanger is very willing to acknowledge these limitations. So, I don't take us to disagree on this point.

⁹ On this, compare Manne(2013)'s reading of Williams(1979). Although, of course, "brow-beating" of various kinds is often quite effective in practice.

¹⁰ REDACTED. Compare Haslanger(2012).

¹¹ Jaeggi distinguishes between "internal" and "immanent" critique in her discussion of these issues, but she does so by understanding "internal" critique quite narrowly – more narrowly, I think, than many who use this term. Nonetheless, I agree with Jaeggi that many of the most interesting forms of critique are neither "wholly internal" to the practice being critiqued nor "wholly external" to that practice. In the end, it seems to me that there is less a bright line between two (or even three) forms of critique here, and more a multidimensional spectrum of different forms and degrees of "internality". As we will see, in the end I will follow Jaeggi in using "immanent" to refer to forms of critique like the one being developed here that sit in between the extremes on this spectrum. For more on this, see below.

¹² Compare Habermas(1981) and Manne(2013). These concerns overlap with the conception of "criticism as conversation" defended in Dover(2019).

¹³ Once again, the strength of the modal "could" in this claim will vary, depending on the degree to which a particular mode of critique is "internal" to the practice being critiqued. Thus, one way to think about the spectrum of different degrees of "internality" noted above is in terms of different interpretations of this modal operator. As before, I don't think we should be searching for the single "correct" reading of this modal. Rather, we should recognize that there are a variety of ways of interpreting it, which correspond to a similar variety of different forms of "internal critique". Which of these is most appropriate in a given situation will depend on the details of that situation and our aims as critics.

2. Social Practices and Shared Practical Understanding

Unfortunately, for all its obvious attractions, the very possibility of this sort of critique has often seemed puzzling. For surely there is no guarantee that the social practices we aim to critique are structured such as to allow this sort of internal or immanent critique to gain a foothold in them. This, of course, is why a turn to more external forms of criticism often seems warranted. In the absence of a compelling account of how internal critique is possible, in many cases it is only natural to fall back on more external modes of criticism.

As I've indicated, I believe that this move is often legitimate, but I am also more optimistic than many about the possibility of developing forms of social critique on which it is possible to critique social practices or institutions on grounds of irrationality from a broadly "internal" or "immanent" perspective. In what follows, I hope to develop one such method of critique by bringing together (i) a broadly Kantian account of rationality as aiming at theoretical and practical understanding and (ii) some of the recent explosion of work on the nature of social practices and institutions. In this section, I want to show how reflection on certain elements that are common to much of this recent work in social philosophy leads us naturally to the idea of social practices as aiming at something like forms of collective practical understanding. In this way, I hope to argue that much of this recent work implicitly supports thinking about collective rationality in a manner that stresses the connections between practical rationality in general and practical understanding.

To do so, let's begin by considering the question of how we should conceive of the "social practices" that are the object of social critique. The literature on this topic is, of course, extensive – and (happily) growing rapidly. So, I will limit my discussion here to highlighting a few features of social practices which make them suitable targets for the sort of critique I am interested in. In doing so, I will try (as much as possible) to remain neutral with respect to the many other issues in social ontology and social philosophy.

To do so, I want to focus on what are (perhaps) the two most prominent recent attempts to develop a critical conception of the nature of social practices – namely, those developed by Rahel Jaeggi and Sally Haslanger in their recent work on this subject.¹⁴ Taking these two accounts in turn, Jaeggi uses the phrase "forms of social life" to refer to the objects of social critique – that is, to what I have been calling "social practices". A "form of life", in this sense is "a culturally shaped 'order of human co-existence' that encompasses an 'ensemble of practices and orientations' as well as their institutional manifestations and materializations."¹⁵ According to Jaeggi, such social "forms of life" are apt objects of immanent criticism when they prove themselves incapable of solving the problems that naturally arise within their natural course of development. In general, for Jaeggi, such failures of *adaptive-problem-solving* can be traced to ways in which a form of life possesses an inadequate capacity to "learn from" or adapt to changes in the situations it faces – changes which are often the product of the internal dynamic within the form of life in question.

Although there are important differences between their views, Haslanger's account of the objects of social critique shares several features with Jaeggi's account that will be crucial for what follows. In particular, Haslanger defines the "social practices" that are the objects of critique as follows:

Social practices are patterns of learned behavior that enable us (in the primary instances) to coordinate as members of a group in creating, distributing, managing, maintaining, and eliminating a resource (or

¹⁴ For a somewhat more minimal, and game-theoretic conception of "social practices", see James(2012). I believe we can also extract the materials necessary for the form of social critique in my sense from James's conception of practices, but I will not develop this argument here.

¹⁵ Jaeggi(2019), 89.

multiple resources), due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behavior and the resource(s) in question, as interpreted through shared meanings/cultural schemas.¹⁶

Where “schemas” and “resources” are defined as follows:

... schemas are clusters of culturally shared mental states and processes, including concepts, attitudes, dispositions, and such, that enable us to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought, and affect. Resources are things of all sorts ... that are taken to have some (positive or negative) value ...¹⁷

There is a great we might say about these two accounts *and* their relationship to one another. But for present purposes what is most important are a few central elements that are common to both. First, on both accounts, the objects of social critique – what I have been calling “social practices” – are constituted by networks of social conventions, customs, and institutions – which both structure, and are structured by, the practical deliberations and choices of the agents who participate in them. As such, on both accounts, social practices involve more than mere patterns of behavior. They also involve patterns of reasoning, feeling, attention, and deliberation, which are internalized (to at least some degree) by those who participate in the practices in question. In this way, on both accounts, social practices or forms of life represent social or shared “forms of practical consciousness”. They are not *blind* patterns of behavior – rather, the patterns of action that they involve are dependent upon patterns of thought, feeling, and reasoning.

In this way, “social practices” in this sense always involve some form of shared “practical ideology” – in the broad, non-pejorative sense of “ideology” in which an “ideology” is just a system of shared attitudes and concepts that help to determine what the participants in some practice do. Crucially, unlike some theorists of ideology, for both Jaeggi and Haslanger, the sort of “ideology” which is associated with any social practice consists of *both* theoretical *and* practical attitudes and concepts. As a result, “ideology” in the sense relevant here goes beyond mere beliefs or other theoretical attitudes to include systems of concepts and networks of attitudes other than belief such as intention or desire. This will be important in what follows – for, given this, we should not assume that such “ideologies” can *only* be critiqued on grounds of epistemic irrationality. Rather, given their practical dimension, they will also be potentially subject to practical forms of irrationality as well.¹⁸

In short, the central point for our purposes about both these accounts of social practices is that they agree that any such practice will be associated with a sort of “shared practical consciousness”. In saying this, it is important to stress that the attitudes and concepts involved in this sort of “shared practical consciousness” will often not be “shared” in the strong sense of being possessed by each and every participant in the social

¹⁶ Haslanger(2018), 17. Note that my talk of “social practices” is meant to cover both what Haslanger calls “social practices” and what she calls “social structures”. But this is merely in the interest of simplifying terminology.

¹⁷ Haslanger(2017).

¹⁸ On this contrast Shelby(2003)'s claim that, “... ideologies purport to be forms of knowledge and thus cannot be rationally rejected or accepted without epistemic grounds for doing so. Regardless of what other troublesome features a set of beliefs may have, if we think the beliefs are nevertheless true or sufficiently warranted, then surely we must accept them.” As I am using these terms here, this represents an overly narrow concept of the sort of “ideology” that is associated with any social practice. For an insightful discussion of the epistemic dimensions of ideology critique, see Stanley(2016). To be clear, this is not meant as an objection to either Stanley or Shelby's accounts, which are explicitly presented as just one part of a larger account of rational critique in a more general sense. Thus, much as was true with respect to more “external” forms of critique, I hope the form of rational critique discussed below will *complement* what they have say about the purely epistemic dimensions of critique. For related comments, see Swanson(2018) and Haslanger(2012).

practice in question. Rather, what makes these attitudes and concepts an essential element of the social practice is the *explanatory role* they play with respect to what goes on within that practice. In some cases, the “shared ideology” in question may achieve this explanatory role via being literally shared (at least to some degree) by every participant in the practice in question. But in other cases, attitudes or concepts will achieve this status via a more complicated route – say, by being possessed by groups who themselves play a particularly significant role in determining what goes on within the practice or through some form of semantic externalism or by being encoded in some way in the institutions and rules which structure that practice. In this way, the precise sense in which the “form of practical consciousness” associated with some social practice is “shared” by its participants will often vary from case to case.

Nonetheless, what distinguishes “social practices” or “forms of social life” (in the sense at issue here) from blind patterns of behavior is precisely that the behavior of those involved in a genuine social practice is guided by a set of (implicit or explicit) practical attitudes that embodies a collective sense of “what to do” which is characteristic of the social practice in question. But this should not be terribly controversial today. For while the nature of collective intentional attitudes is, of course, hotly debated – the mere existence of collective forms of intentionality is now wildly accepted.¹⁹

That having been said, in the most normal cases, the “shared practical consciousness” characteristic of a social practice will be closely related to practical attitudes that are common among the individuals who are part of the social practice. That is, the normal case will be one in which the “ideology” associated with some social practice is shared in virtue of (implicitly or explicitly) informing the psychology of the individual participants within that practice. Particularly important in this regard is the conceptual repertoire that individuals within the practice make use of when they think about the practical questions that arise for them within that practice.²⁰ But shared answers to practical questions might also be realized through explicit shared dogmas, patterns of emotional response, or incentive structures within the practice.²¹

Thus, as defined here, it is distinctive of social practices that they involve a pattern of actions which are guided by a shared (in the sense just defined) sense of what to do. In other words, it is constitutive of such practices that their activities are guided by a shared grasp of “the thing to do” under certain circumstances. Given this, one way to evaluate a social practice on its own terms is to ask what this conception of “what to do” would have to be like if that social practice is to be successful. We will discuss this question in much more detail in the next section, when we turn to the broadly Kantian conception of rationality that I hope to bring to bear on these issues. But certain elements of the shared conception of “what to do” that is operative within any successful social practice should be relatively clear. For example, in any meaningful social practice, this shared sense of “what to do” needs to extend beyond, say, a mere piecemeal list of “actions to be performed under particular circumstances”. Rather, in order to motivate

¹⁹ On many views of *collective agency*, social practices in my sense could thus be identified with *forms of collective agency*. See, e.g., Gilbert(1992). The status of group agents is also, of course, a hotly debated issue in the context of Marxist theory – with a particular focus on whether “classes” can be thought of as collective agents in some sense. On this topic, compare, for example, Eagleton(2007)’s objections to “historicist Marxism” of the sort inspired by Lukacs.

²⁰ Compare the recent wave of work on “conceptual ethics” and “conceptual engineering”.

²¹ One thing that won’t normally be involved in genuinely “shared” social practices is the domination of one group by another by mere *brute force*. Such cases obviously exist, but they seem to me to be poorly described in terms of a social practice that is “shared” by the two groups in question. Rather, to the degree that such relations of brute domination are present, it seems more appropriate to describe the situation in terms of one group (and their social practices) dominating another group (with their own distinct social practices). That having been I do think that the present focus on practical understanding often provides *one* way of critiquing such arrangements. For example, relations of domination are normally sustained in by various sorts of blind-spots or distortions in our practical understanding of those who are dominated. But in such cases, subtle arguments about practical understanding hardly seem necessary to see what is objectionable about the practices in question.

participants to act in accordance with its demands, the grasp of what to do at work in a social practice must embody some sense of *why* these actions are to be done.²² And, in order to be effective across a variety of circumstances, this conception of what to do must also be able to draw on some further sense of *how* these things are to be done. Finally, if a practice or way of life is to have any flexibility or ability to adapt to new situations, it will have to place these “things to do” *within a broader context* that allows for the reinterpretation of them under changing circumstances. Only in this case, will a social practice or way of life really have any “life” at all.²³

In all these ways, we can see that a social practice must be based around – not just a shared *conception* of what to do – but also some degree of *shared understanding* of this – some degree, that is, of what I will in the next section call “practical understanding”.²⁴ Once again, this shared understanding of what to do is important here because it plays a certain sort of explanatory role within any properly functioning social practice. That is, a social practice achieves what it does *in virtue of* the effectiveness of this shared practical understanding. In this way, the success or failure of a social practice will be a function of the degree to which it is successful at providing its participants with shared practical understanding (at least within the relevant domain). In this sense, we can regard *any* social practice as an *attempt to achieve a form of shared practical understanding*, albeit one limited to the goals or areas of life which are distinctive of the social practice in question. Thus, we can say that social practices, in the sense defined above, *constitutively aim* at certain forms of collective practical understanding.

3. Rationality and the Nature of Practical Understanding

Although necessarily brief, I hope this discussion shows how one can extract, from the recent literature on the nature of social practices, a basic connection between (i) what is for any social practice to function well and (ii) the ability of that practice to provide its participants with a shared understanding of what to do (insofar as this is relevant). As noted above, we might also have arrived at this idea by taking the general idea of rationality as aiming at understanding and applying it to the collective or social case. Thus, I hope these comments have shown why it is plausible to think that something like this conception of collective rationality is implicit in much of the recent wave of work on the nature of social practices or forms of life. Indeed, I would argue that it is this connection with practical understanding that makes such practices “rational” in more than a merely instrumental or technical sense of this term.

My main aim in what follows will be to argue that this connection between social practices and practical understanding provides us with a powerful avenue for approaching the question of how such practices can be more or less rational – one which is, in an important sense, “internal” or “immanent” to the practices in question. But to understand the power of this approach, we need first to understand what “practical understanding” involves in more detail, and to consider how such understanding is connected with practical rationality.

²² Of course, in many cases a practice’s shared understanding of what to do and why will only go so deep. That is, such shared forms of “practical consciousness” will often themselves be supported by something like a Rawlsian “overlapping consensus” of more fundamental ethical views.

²³ On this last point, compare Jaeggi(2005/2014)’s discussion of alienation as a sort of “lifelessness”.

²⁴ Again this echoes some of the important points Haslanger(2017) makes about these issues. Nonetheless, I prefer to focus on the connection between *practical understanding* and social practices, because (in one sense) it seems to take things a step further than Haslanger’s definition of “social practices” does. For instance, if we ask *why* Haslangerian schemas and resources are so important for social practices, it seems to me that the answer is precisely that they are important because of how they contribute to the body of practical understanding associated with the in practice.

In discussing this question, it is important to stress at the outset that I'll be using the phrase "practical understanding" as a term of art, albeit one with a long Kantian history. In particular, as I'll be using it, "practical understanding" is that form of understanding or cognition which answers *distinctively practical questions* such as the question of *what to do*. As such, practical understanding (in my sense) should not be confused with an understanding of practically-relevant theoretical questions – although it will in many cases require this. Nor is practical understanding *merely* a matter of *knowing how* to do something, although it will almost always require a good deal of this sort of "know how". Rather, on my Kantian usage of these terms, just as theoretical understanding is an understanding of *what is*, practical understanding is an understanding of *what to do* (or value or prefer).²⁵

Just *which* attitudes, states, or activities are required if one is to understand what to do in this sense is a question that will depend greatly on one's views in moral psychology and the philosophy of action. For some, it will be sufficient that one has the proper *intentions, plans, or actions* in the right relations. For example, a student of Bratman might argue that practical understanding is constituted by a network of intentions or planning states. But for others, genuine practical understanding may require something more, such as certain *normative beliefs or attitudes*. Finally, for those of us sympathetic to the idea that intention and action is governed by some form of *the guise of the good*, there may be a sense in which these come to the same thing. In interests of full disclosure, my own view is a version of this last option.²⁶ But I don't want to rely on such controversial claims here, so I will generally use the neutral term "practical attitudes" to describe the attitudes (whatever these are) that constitute practical understanding. Similarly, for reasons of maximal neutrality on these questions, I will generally describe practical understanding in *imperative terms* such as an "understanding of what to do" – as opposed to (say) describing it using normative or evaluative concepts, as is tempting for those of us friendly to the guise of the good.

It is also important to distinguish this way of talking about "practical understanding" from "practical knowledge" in the sense that has been the focus of the Anscombean tradition in philosophy of action. When Anscombe (and those influenced by her) speak of "practical knowledge", they generally have in mind a (non-observational and non-inferential) knowledge of *what one is doing*. This sort of practical self-knowledge is closely related to, but at least nominally distinct from, practical understanding in my sense – i.e., understanding of *what to do*. Of course, in endorsing a version of the guise of the good, Anscombe herself acknowledges a close connection between both of these forms of "practical knowledge or understanding", so I don't take myself to have a deep disagreement with her on this point. But it is important not to confuse "practical understanding" in my sense with "practical knowledge" in hers – even if (as I believe to be true) they are constitutively connected with one another.²⁷

As noted above, in other recent work, I have argued that we can construct a powerful, and deeply Kantian, conception of rationality by beginning with the idea of rationality as aiming at both theoretical and practical understanding in something like this sense. But the details of this account of rationality won't be crucial here. Rather what matters most for present purposes is simply that practical understanding, when

²⁵ On this, compare, for example, Hall(1986)'s emphasis on ideology as a matter of "practical thought and reasoning." See also Kolakowski, who writes that, in the case of "emancipatory knowledge", "the understanding and transformation of reality are not two separate processes, but one and the same phenomenon."

²⁶ REDACTED.

²⁷ Similarly, one should not confuse practical understanding with the sort of self-understanding that plays a central role in Velleman(2000, 2009, 2013)'s theory of agency. For Velleman, agency aims at a certain sort of folk-psychological understanding of oneself. That is, on his view, agency constitutively aims at acting in ways that are intelligible to the agent given his folk-psychological understanding of himself. In this way, for Velleman, the sort of understanding that is relevant to practical rationality is ultimately self-directed and *theoretical* in character.

defined in this way, carries with it a number of robust success conditions.²⁸ It is these success conditions that will define the conception of “rationality” I will make use of here to criticize social practices as “irrational”.

Crucially, these success conditions involve both conditions that are distinctive of practical *as opposed to* theoretical understanding and requirements which capture important *commonalities* between practical and theoretical understanding. As we will see below, the most important of the former set of requirements is the following. Given that it involves an attempt to answer *distinctively practical* questions such as the question of what to do, practical understanding is only fully successful insofar as it is realized in effective action. That is, an answer to the question of what to do that is not translated into effective action is plainly defective *qua* an answer to that *practical* question – just as answers to theoretical questions are only successful insofar as they are appropriately connected with the truth.

We will return to the practicality of practical understanding in a moment. But let me set the differences between theoretical and practical understanding aside for now, to focus on the commonalities between them. Most important of these is the idea that understanding is successful only insofar as it *makes sense* of its objects – be those objects facts that obtain or actions that are to be done. To get a sense of the significance of this requirement, we can start with the familiar observation that understanding requires more than merely getting things right on an *attitude-by-attitude* basis. For example, it is easy to have many true beliefs about some subject matter, without thereby having any real understanding of it. A long list of disconnected items of trivia may give one a great deal of piecemeal knowledge, but it does not provide one with much understanding of anything.

Crucially, the same phenomenon is also easy to recognize in the practical domain. I can easily intend to do the right thing without having any real practical understanding of what to do. For example, suppose I am considering whether to perform one of two actions, A or B. And suppose that, in whatever sense of correctness we take to apply to such decisions, the correct choice is A. Finally, suppose I form an intention to A. In that case I will have arrived at the correct answer to the practical question I was considering, but I may still be very far from achieving practical understanding of it. For example, I may have no grasp of *why* A was the thing to choose.²⁹ Or I may have little grip on *how* A is to be done in my circumstances.³⁰ In these ways, like theoretical understanding, practical understanding requires more than piecemeal correctness – it requires an integrated body of practical attitudes that allows one to answer such why and how questions.³¹

At a minimum, then, practical understanding requires something beyond a set of unrelated practical attitudes. It requires a network of attitudes that allow me to answer why and how questions of this sort. Exactly what more is required here is a complicated question. But the intuitive failing in these cases is clear enough. In them, although I have answered some question correctly, I have no real understanding because I cannot make sense of my answer. And, in both cases, this failure has something to do with my inability to place this answer in an appropriate context.

In the end, I think both ordinary practical reasoning and more “morally loaded” forms of reasoning are helpfully understood as (functionally speaking) aiming at practical understanding in just this sense. For example, even the most basic forms of practical reasoning can be fruitfully understood as having the function of increasing practical understanding. Consider, for example, ordinary cases of instrumental reasoning. Once

²⁸ REDACTED.

²⁹ Note that social practices might be seen encoding an understanding of the “reasons relation” in something like Scanlon(2013)’s sense.

³⁰ As noted above, this means that practical understanding in my sense often requires a good deal of “know how”. But this does not mean we can identify the two, since mere know how will not, on its own, answer the fundamental practical question of what to do.

³¹ Of course, as Kant famously stressed (albeit in the theoretical domain), our ability such why-questions may often be limited. In such cases, complete practical understanding is an ideal that we imperfect creatures can at best approximate.

we have the idea of practical understanding on the table, we can see such reasoning as functioning to increase our understanding of both *which* determinate action is to be done and *how* to do it. Thus, even the most mundane, “Humean” modes of practical reasoning fit naturally into the framework provided by a conception of practical reasoning as aiming at practical understanding. And this is only truer when we turn to the richer forms of reasoning associated with more Kantian conceptions of practical rationality. For example, the idea that practical reasoning seeks an ever more universal perspective on practical questions makes perfect sense if we view practical reasoning as aiming at practical understanding (and not merely, say, doing what morality demands of us). For, just as placing our theoretical views into a more general and systematic context adds to our understanding, so too does placing our practical views into a larger and more systematic practical context.

With those similarities between theoretical and practical understanding in mind, let’s return to some of the ways in which practical understanding *differs* from theoretical understanding. Here the crucial difference is, again, that practical understanding aims to achieve an understanding that answers the distinctively practical questions we face as agents or practical reasoners – that is, an understanding of *what to do*. As such, practical understanding is only fully successful *as an answer to these sorts of practical questions* when its answers to them are effectively realized in the world as actions. For the point of answering practical questions is precisely that one’s answers to them should make a difference in the world through one’s actions.³² In short, as practical, the function of practical understanding is to actualize itself in action.³³

Thus, much like theoretical knowledge, practical understanding is very far from being something that is merely “in the head” of the person who possesses it. *Practical* understanding is precisely not a matter of “merely interpreting what is”. It is a matter of understanding what to do in a manner that makes a real difference to things by being embodied in material actions, institutions, social practices, and the like. In this way, the question of whether some social practice or way of life is successful as a form of *practical* understanding goes well beyond anything purely mental or internal to the subject. Rather, failures of practical understanding can appear *throughout* the relationship between mind and world – that is, throughout the world insofar as it depends (or fails to depend) upon our practical attitudes.

The practicality of practical understanding in this sense is important here, in part, because it provides at least the beginnings of an answer to the (very natural) worry that a focus on practical understanding must necessarily miss much of what matters most from a critical perspective.³⁴ For example, one might think that, even if there is a sense in which totalitarian regimes are associated with failures of shared practical understanding – as, indeed, Arendt(1951)’s account of totalitarianism would imply – that might seem to be far from the *main* problem with them. Rather, isn’t the main problem with totalitarianism the fundamentally unjust, harmful, and simply abusive manner that the citizens of such a state are treated by their government? As already noted, I think there is certainly something to this thought. But I also think that objections like it are based, to some degree, on a failure to fully grasp the practicality of practical understanding. For once we recognize that “practical understanding” is necessarily embodied in real, material actions, social structures, and institutions, we will be able to recognize that the practical pathologies of all these aspects of a society (at least potentially) fall under the jurisdiction of the present mode of critique.³⁵

³² Such failures are, of course, practical in character, but this does not mean that they are not failures of practical understanding in the sense at issue here.

³³ Given this, it should not be too hard to see why fully successful practical understanding in my sense must be closely connected with practical knowledge in Anscombe’s sense of this term.

³⁴ Compare Adorno’s complaint that Husserl’s philosophy involves “the denigration of *praxis* to a simple special case of intentionality”. (Adorno 1990, 180)

³⁵ For a very helpful discussion of the material dimensions of ideology, as well as many other features of the same, see Kukla(2018). Note, though, that I generally use the term “ideology” in a looser fashion than Kukla does in her paper.

4. Practical Understanding and Immanent Critique

With this in mind, I want to combine our discussion of the nature of social practices with our discussion of practical understanding. I argued above that any genuine social practice will be structured around – not just a bare conception of “what to do” – but rather a shared form of practical understanding. In particular, a functional social practice requires – not just a shared sense of what to do – but also a shared grasp of why and how things are to be done – one which places them into a larger context and allows them to take on the sort of practical significance they must have to effectively guide a social practice. In this sense, any social practice must, of necessity be in the “practical understanding business”, at least to some degree.

It is important to stress that my claim here goes beyond the idea that this sort of “practical understanding” is instrumentally valuable for such social practices. For the idea here is not merely that practical understanding is one means (among many) of achieving the ends of a particular social practice. Rather, the thought is a Kantian one – that the basic form of success or failure which is characteristic of social practices *as such* is one on which social practices are successful *in virtue of* embodying a shared body of practical understanding. In this sense, practical understanding provides social practices with a standard of success that is *constitutive* of such practices as such. Thus, whether or not the participants in some social practice explicitly recognize this, the nature of any social practice implies that its success or failure is, in part, a function of the degree to which it embodies a shared practical understanding of the relevant domain.

In other words, insofar as practices aim to motivate agents to perform particular actions in a manner that is sensitive to context and circumstances, they are in the “practical understanding business”. And insofar as they are in that business, it seems reasonable to evaluate them by its standards. Thus, if this line of argument is correct, the standards of success that apply to all forms of practical understanding as such can provide us with an important lens through which evaluate the success or failure of social practices on rational grounds – one which is in some sense “internal”, or at least “immanent”, to these practices.

In saying this, it is important not to overstate the sense in which the resulting form of critique is “internal” or “immanent” to the practices in question. For none of this means that the standards we derive from role that practical understanding plays in some practice will be obvious or “inescapable” from within that practice. Rather, to make use of a Kantian turn of phrase, these standards are best regarded as describing the “form” a social practice must have in order to be successful – as opposed to describing the objects it explicitly treats as important or valuable.³⁶ Thus, from now on, I will follow Jaeggi(2013)’s terminology and refer to the form of critique being developed here as a form of “immanent” (as opposed to a narrowly “internal”) critique.

Although I cannot explore these connections in detail here, this point about the practicality of practical understanding is also important for understanding the relationship between the present form of rational critique and more familiar forms of critique that focus on the moral or rational significance of *autonomy*. In particular, once we appreciate that attempts at practical understanding are only successful insofar as one’s practical understanding is effective at determining how things are, we can see that successful practical understanding is itself a form of autonomy. In this way, far from being a competitor to a focus on autonomy, I think that the present account of critique is best viewed as an attempt to nail down *the kind of* autonomy that is relevant to social critique. But discussing these connections in detail would take us too far from our main line of argument here. I discuss these relations in REDACTED. A key point within in that discussion is the interdependence between the development of a unified understanding of the world and the development of a unified self-conscious self. This, of course, resonates with the Althusserian emphasis on the interdependence of ideology and subject-formation. See Althusser(1971) and compare again Kukla(2018).

³⁶ To use Jaeggi(2013)’s terminology, this means that we are dealing with an “immanent” as opposed to an “internal” mode of critique here.

In particular, even given everything that we have said, it is not hard to imagine social practices which treat practical understanding as having very little explicit first-order value or importance. The important point about such social practices, on the present account, is not that they are impossible, but rather that they involve an implicit conflict between the *form* common to all successful social practices as such and the *values* that particular social practices treat as important. The possibility of such conflicts is completely unsurprising within the context of ideology critique – so they should not be taken to conflict with the sense of immanent critique we are developing. But they do demonstrate that the sense in which such critique is “internal” should not be pushed too far.

In other words, the “immanent” character of this sort of critique does not rule out the possibility of social practices within which it is natural to respond to such critique by shrugging one’s shoulders and saying, “If that’s true, then so much the worse for practical understanding and, by extension, ‘social practices’ in the sense you’ve been discussing.” On the present account, such a response is always in some sense irrational, but it is not impossible by any means.³⁷ Moreover, there is nothing in the present account that rules out the possibility of many social practices that are able to function as they do precisely because of the failings of practical understanding they involve. For example, consider a pyramid scheme.³⁸ It seems to be essential to internal “proper functioning” of such schemes that there be systematic failure of practical understanding within them. Thus, even if there is a sense in which all social practices function as they do in virtue of certain respects in which they provide their participants with a shared practical understanding of what to do within them, this in no way rules out the possibility that many social practices are able to function as they do because of the manner in which they *limit* such understanding or even make understanding of *certain* questions impossible.

Such “productive” failures of practical understanding will be pervasive in many social practices (at least for the ideology theorist). But this does not conflict with the present account – indeed, it is precisely this feature of such practices that gives the present account much of its critical force. For, despite all this, it remains true that no social practice (as such) cannot be *completely indifferent* to practical understanding. All social practices are, by definition, guided by practical attitudes that represent themselves as providing the participants in that practice with an understanding of what to do within it. Given this, a form of critique which is grounded in the requirements on practical understanding (in general) will always be able to get *some* non-trivial foothold within any meaningful social practice. In this sense, such critique is never one that operates “wholly from the outside” – even if it is not “wholly internal” to the practice either. Any social practice must implicitly be oriented around some (perhaps rather limited) form of practical understanding. Thus, a form of critique that focuses on practical understanding can be seen as applying to a practice a generalized version of a sort of rationality that is already operative within that practice. Of course, those involved in a particular social practice can resist this pressure to generalize their implicit concern for *certain forms* of practical understanding to a *general* concern for practical understanding *as such*. But this is no surprise. For one can *always* resist the pressure to become more consistent or more rational, however these notions are understood.

Once again, we might make this point by referring to this as an “immanent”, as opposed to narrowly “internal”, form of critique. In doing so, we are marking in part, the fact that the “immanent” character of a form of critique in no way makes that critique *irresistible* from within that practice. Rather, the point here is that we are critiquing practices using only starting points and forms of thought that are already present within that practice *at least in some form and to some degree*. The present account of critique meets this standard of

³⁷ In this sense, the present model is subject to a version of the “shmagency” point, but this does not constitute an *objection* to our model of critique if its ambitions are understood in the correct manner. Compare Enoch(2006, 2012).

³⁸ Thanks to REDACTED for suggesting this example here. For a similar worry, see Bagnoli(2021).

“immanent critique” insofar as it operates via forms of reasoning and thought that must be present, at least to some degree, in any form of practical understanding. Of course, most social practices or ways of life will only accept these forms of reasoning in a limited or restricted form. This, after all, is just what makes them criticizable from the present perspective. But this alone should not be taken to make this criticism “purely external” on pain of rendering the whole idea of immanent criticism incoherent.

In support of thinking of immanent critique in this more modest fashion, it may be helpful to briefly consider Williams’s famous account of “internal reasons” here.³⁹ On Williams’s account, one can only be said to have reason to perform some action A insofar as it is possible to arrive at a motivation to A via the following procedure: one takes one’s current motivational state and transforms this “subjective motivational set” through certain basic forms of reasoning, imagination, or the like (that is, via a “sound deliberative route”). In articulating this conception of “internal reasons”, Williams was plainly attempting to make sense of the possibility of a non-trivial form of internal or immanent criticism. But, even here, the “internal” character of this mode of criticism does *not* imply that the agent being criticized must *actually accept* the patterns of reasoning involved in “sound deliberation”. In particular, it does not imply that they must accept these patterns of reasoning in full generality. Indeed, in many cases, the target of this sort of criticism will be criticizable *precisely* because they have failed to employ these patterns of reasoning as broadly as they should. So, even in Williams’s sense of “internal”, a form of criticism may be “internal”, even though the agents being criticized do not themselves accept the reasoning involved in that criticism in full generality.

Given this, if Williams’s conception of criticism counts as “internal”, then so too should the form of immanent critique I am defending here. And since Williams’s account of “internal reasons” is perhaps the prototypical form of “internal criticism” in the recent analytic literature, this gives us good reason to accept that the present form of critique is “internal” in a non-trivial sense of this term.

In any case, as a purely contingent matter, many of the social practices we might wish to critique *do* seem to be concerned with achieving a genuine form of practical understanding in our sense. After all, most of these ways of life *do* claim to provide their participants with a meaningful understanding of what to do and why. For instance, consider a fundamentalist organization like ISIS. Such organizations certainly seem to be in the business of providing this sort of understanding to their members. Indeed, one of their primary selling points is their ability to give their members a (misleading) sense of their lives as genuinely meaningful. So even if we reject the claims I have been making here about the significance of practical understanding for *all* social practices in a favor of a more “contextualist” approach, a focus on practical understanding should be productive in the context of immanent critique across a wide range of existing social practices.

Indeed, this points to a further reason to think that the idea that rationality is concerned with understanding is ideally suited to provide a foundation for immanent critique. For it is precisely a concern to *understand* different ways of life *on their own terms* that (in large part) motivates resistance to purely external forms of critique. Thus, there is a sense in which a commitment to the ideal of immanent critique carries with it a commitment to the importance of understanding as a rational aim. In this sense, whenever we speaking to an audience who shares our interest in immanent critique, we will be speaking to individuals who share (at least to some degree, and in some form) our interest in achieving a shared practical understanding of our interacting social practices.⁴⁰

³⁹ Williams(1979). See again Manne(2013). For further discussion of the connection between this and the notion of immanent critique, see REDACTED.

⁴⁰ Once again, if what I argue elsewhere is correct, this point applies to any agent precisely insofar as they are rational. But I don’t want the main line of argument in this paper to rest on the claim that the telos of rationality in general is understanding. Nonetheless, if we accepted this idea – that is, if we thought that the constitutive project of rationality was to achieve (theoretical and practical) understanding – that would provide a deeper, and more Kantian, way of motivating this approach to critique.

5. Practical Understanding as a Tool for Critique

Of course, all of this is only significant insofar as the success conditions associated with practical understanding actually do provide us with a useful source of critical leverage against objectionable social practices. So do these connections really provide us with the means for an *effective* and *robust* critique of social practices? In other words, does a focus on practical understanding provides us with a powerful tool for the diagnosis of what Axel Honneth has called “social pathologies of reason”?⁴¹

This is a very large and open-ended question, and the answer to it is sure to be a matter of degree. In particular, as noted at the outset of this essay, I do not want to claim that the present mode of immanent critique captures every form of legitimate criticism that might be leveled at social practices or institutions. But I do want to claim that it provides us with powerful grounds for complaint – grounds which, in particular, can unify many of the forms of criticism familiar from the broadly Kantian/Hegelian/Marxist tradition of social critique. Unfortunately, defending this claim in detail would be a book-length project. But I want to close here by sketching a few examples of the critical power of this mode of critique.

a. Objectification Mistakes

To do so, let’s begin with one of the most familiar targets of ideology critique: what Geuss calls “objectification mistakes”.⁴² Objectification mistakes, in Geuss’s sense, involve a failure to recognize that some feature of social life is “made” as opposed to “given” – that is, that it is dependent upon (contingent) human practical attitudes or choices as opposed to being “natural” or “necessary”. Such mistakes, of course, always involve a failure of *theoretical* understanding insofar as they involve false beliefs about the degree to which something depends on us and our choices. But this purely epistemic failing is not the main problem with them. Rather, objectification mistakes are really problematic from the perspective of critical theory precisely because they also involve a failure of *practical* understanding.

To see why the failure involved in an objectification mistake extends, not just to theoretical rationality, but also to practical rationality in the sense concerned with practical understanding, note the following. In cases that involve an objectification mistake, there is a feature of social reality whose existence depends upon its participants’ practical attitudes, but those participants are unaware of this dependence. Moreover, in the cases of greatest interest to the critical theorist, this is not merely an accidental feature of this feature of social reality. Rather, the most interesting cases are ones in which the objectification mistake is *essential* to some social practice or institution. In other words, the cases of real interest to the critical theorist are ones in which the very existence of some social practice depends on its participants’ ignorance of the fact that certain aspects of the world depend upon them.

Thus, in these cases, we have a feature of the world that depends on our practical attitudes – but where the existence of this practice (and the relevant relation of dependence) is *itself* dependent on our ignorance of this relation of dependence. Once this is clear, we can see that objectification mistakes represent a failure, not just of theoretical, but also of practical understanding. For while the situation just described is one where certain practical attitudes *are* “translated” into action and social reality, it is also one in which the agents who have these attitudes are not (and indeed *cannot become*) aware of this relationship of dependence. So, while there are (in a sense) practically efficacious practical attitudes in these cases, the efficacy of these

⁴¹ Without necessarily endorsing Honneth(2009)’s quasi-teleological conception of the historical development of rationality as a social phenomenon.

⁴² Geuss(1981).

attitudes depends on the agents' ignorance of this very efficacy. As a result, in cases involving objectification mistakes, there is no real practical understanding – since the mistake in question blocks the agents in question from every fully making sense of how and why they are doing what they do.⁴³

b. Alienation

For this reason, objectification mistakes may be thought of as a special case of a more general phenomena that is at the center of a great deal of social criticism: *alienation*. Unfortunately, the nature of “alienation” is extremely difficult to pin down. For example, consider the best recent treatment of this topic, Jaeggi's earlier work *Alienation*. In introducing the many facets of the phenomenon labeled “alienation”, Jaeggi writes the following:

Alienation means indifference and internal division, but also powerlessness and relationlessness with respect to oneself and to a world experienced as indifferent and alien. Alienation is the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions and thereby also—so the fundamental intuition of the theory of alienation—to oneself. An alienated world presents itself to individuals as insignificant and meaningless, as rigidified or impoverished, as a world that is not one's own, which is to say, a world in which one is not “at home” and over which one can have no influence. The alienated subject becomes a stranger to itself; it no longer experiences itself as an “actively effective subject” but a “passive object” at the mercy of unknown forces.⁴⁴

As this summary indicates, it is clear that to speak of “alienation” is to speak of a diverse range of complaints – whose relationship (as Jaeggi herself stresses) is often difficult to completely and precisely explain. Given this, I don't want to claim here that *everything* that might reasonably be regarded as a form of alienation can be understood as a failure of practical understanding in my sense. But nonetheless, I think it is striking that so many of the phenomena that Jaeggi cites as forms of alienation can be captured very naturally within this framework.

For example, consider a sense of *indifference* with respect to one's life and the choices one faces in that life. This form of alienation plainly represents a failure of practical understanding in our sense. For it involves a failure to fully appreciate or grasp what is to be done and why. In other words, finding “meaning” or “purpose” in the world is plainly one central element in having a genuine practical understanding in our sense. And forms of alienation that involve a failure to find this sort of meaning in life are captured very well by the present account.

Similarly, take a sense of *powerlessness* or mere *passivity*. This sort of self-consciousness is also incompatible with successful practical understanding in our sense. For again, part of what it is for practical understanding to be successful is for it to “self-consciously” manifest itself in effective action in the world. In other words, successful practical understanding requires a recognition that one has this sort of efficacy, and it requires that *this* recognition makes a difference to the way things are. Thus, much as in the special case of objectification mistakes, a failure to represent oneself as powerful or active always involves a defect of practical understanding in our sense.

⁴³ Something similar is true of the sort of ignorance of actual motives that constitutes Engels(1893)'s original definition of “false consciousness”: “Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces.”

⁴⁴ Jaeggi(2014).

Finally, as we will discuss in the next section, in order to understand something, we must be able to place what we understand within a larger, more unified context that allows us to answer why and how questions with respect to it. Thus, insofar as the world or oneself appears to one to be *deeply fragmented* or *disunified*, this too will represent a dimension along which our practical understanding is defective.

In all these ways, the present focus on practical understanding seems perfectly placed to capture the concerns traditionally associated with “alienation critique”. Thus, it is no surprise that Jaeggi’s own account of alienation fits nicely within the present focus on practical understanding:

Alienation can then be understood as an impairment of acts of appropriation (or as a deficient praxis of appropriation). ... The concept of appropriation refers to a way of establishing relations to oneself and to the world, a way of dealing with oneself and the world and of having oneself and the world at one’s command. Alienation, as a disturbance in this relation, concerns the way these acts of relating to self and world are carried out, that is, whether processes of appropriation fail or are impeded.⁴⁵

Although Jaeggi’s conception of appropriation remains very abstract, I think it is natural to associate failures of “appropriation” in her sense with failure of practical understanding. For example, when Jaeggi speaks of “having oneself and the world at one’s command”, this seems to be best understood in terms of having a certain sort of practical understanding.⁴⁶

Something similar is true of some of Haslanger’s main criticisms of the racial/economic ideology operative within contemporary American society. For example, one of the main thrusts of her critique is that this ideology fails to provide “resources for understanding – or even acknowledging – the perspective of poor women and women of color.”⁴⁷ Obviously, this involves a sense in which these ideologies fail to provide their participants with the sort of shared practical understanding that we have been discussing here. In this regard, it is important to stress that the social roles at issue in these cases are themselves, at least in part, socially constituted. Thus, in cases like the ones Haslanger describes, we are faced with a social practice that (i) brings into existence certain social roles, while (ii) creating an ideological context in which these social roles cannot be fully understood or acknowledged practically. When these features are essential to the social practice, we thus have a social practice that is in the business of literally creating an (at least partially) unintelligible social world.⁴⁸ Cases like these, thus, provide some of the clearest examples of social practices that are criticized on grounds of their incompatibility with the development of full practical understanding.

c. Systematic Unity

With these examples in mind, let’s turn to a more abstract aspect of practical understanding as a tool for critique. As discussed above, to have practical understanding, one must understand why and how what is to be done is to be done. Thus, practical understanding is never piecemeal. It is always understanding of something as situated within a network of explanatory or justificatory connections and inferences. As a result, insofar as a social practice or way of life does not allow its participants to make sense of their actions by placing them within a larger justificatory and explanatory context, it must be judged to be less than fully

⁴⁵ Jaeggi(2005/2014).

⁴⁶ Indeed, I think it may be better suited to do so than Jaeggi’s own (somewhat more narrow) focus on the ability of life-forms to *learn* and *adapt*. But a full discussion of the relationship between our views on this point will have to wait for another time.

⁴⁷ Haslanger(2012).

⁴⁸ Compare Kukla(2018).

successful as a form of practical understanding. So, for example, if some action is contingent upon a lack of understanding of why that action is “to be done”, that will involve a failure of practical understanding.

At the very least, this means that the ideal of full practical understanding provides us with a defeasible reason to prefer ways of life which offer their participants a more general or systematic understanding of why and how actions are to be done. In other words, all other things being equal, understanding – be it practical or theoretical – is better *qua* understanding, the larger and more systematic the context into which it places its objects.⁴⁹

The idea that social practices (even *ceteris paribus*) are more successful *qua* forms of practical understanding insofar as they provide their participants with a wider perspective on what to do is very significant. For instance, it helps to legitimate the idea that ethical progress has a natural tendency towards a more universal perspective on questions of value or right. And it helps to explain why ways of life tend to be more rational insofar as they include modes of reasoning or reflection that are conducive to the placement of one’s actions within a larger explanatory or justificatory context.⁵⁰

At the same time, it is crucial that these demands are *defeasible*. That they are defeasible follows from the fact that there are other dimensions along which understanding can be better or worse. And these other dimensions can often push us in competing directions. For example, understanding requires that we do justice to *both* the systematic context in which particular things are located *and* the particular character of these things as individuals. For this reason, the requirements of understanding tend to push, systematically, in two directions.⁵¹ On the one hand, there is the demand for systematic unity we have been discussing. But on the other, there is also the demand to do justice to the full particularity of individuals – something that often pushes us in precisely the opposite direction as this first demand. In this way, the task of achieving understanding generally requires balancing these two pressures (and others) against one another.⁵²

This is particularly important in the present context, because if we focused *only* on the demand for systematic unity, in isolation from (say) the demand to do justice to the particular, the present account of rational critique might seem to imply that societies are more rational, the more *homogenous* they are. In this way, a focus on understanding might seem to imply the unappetizing result that rational ways of life are never pluralistic ones.

But, in fact, once we attend to *all* of the different pressures associated with understanding, just the opposite is the case. For, in this context, pluralism can be seen as a way of balancing these two demands

⁴⁹ The importance of systematicity and contextualization is closely related to the idea, common to much of the critical tradition, that the main problem with ideology is not that it is *completely false*, but rather that it is *only partially true*. Compare Eagleton(2007)’s discussion of Lukacs:

What is specifically ideological about the bourgeoisie is its inability to grasp the structure of the social formation as a whole, on account of the dire effects of reification. Reification fragments and dislocates our social experience, so that under its influence we forget that society is a collective process and come to see it instead merely as this or that isolated object or institution. ... One might say, then, that on this view our routine consciousness is itself inherently 'ideological', simply by virtue of its partiality. It is not that the statements we make in this situation are necessarily false; it is rather that they are true only in some superficial, empirical way, for they are judgements about isolated objects which have not yet been incorporated into their full context.

⁵⁰ Compare the critique of fashion as involving an essential element of “mangelnden Verallgemeinerbarkeit” in Simmel(2014).

⁵¹ Insofar as I can make good sense of Adorno’s later work, something like this thought seems to me to lie at the heart of it.

⁵² A focus on achieving systematic unity without concern for the actual details of all of the particular cases one is trying to unify is, for example, characteristic of contemporary conspiracy theory. In this sense, at least, conspiracy theories and the grand theories of rationalist metaphysics may (as Adorno and Horkheimer suggested) share a common root.

against each other.⁵³ For example, a pluralistic society allows individuals to develop a diverse range of social practices that do justice to their own particular character and circumstances. But it also, at least insofar as it is rational in the present sense, provides a larger, more systematic context in which this diversity can be seen as mutually supporting and contributing to the collective way of life of the group. Thus, far from conflicting with pluralism, a focus on understanding may actually require a considerable degree of it.

5. Conclusion: Realizing Rationality and the Kantian Political Project

Of course, such concerns hardly exhaust the forms of social critique that follow from the Kantian conception of rationality I have been developing here. But these examples nicely illustrate the manner in which the abstract discussion of collective rationality and shared practical understanding quickly leads us into topics with much more concrete political or social relevance. For the Kantian, much like the Hegelian, this should come as no great surprise. For as I discuss more detail elsewhere, if we follow Kant in conceiving of reason as something like the autonomous capacity for theoretical and practical understanding, the realization of reason's own internal ends requires that reason transforms itself into the centerpiece of a much more general capacity for autonomous action in, and practical understanding of, the world. So, beginning with Kant's basic conception of reason and its ends, we are quickly led to a conception of reason and rationality on which the satisfaction of reason's demands will only be possible insofar as this broader capacity for autonomous practical understanding is realized in the world. And, at least for human beings like us, this task (of realizing reason's own self-understanding *within the world*) requires that reason's own practical self-understanding is embodied in the forms of shared practical understanding that are characteristic of social practices as defined above. Thus, for Kant, the project of realizing reason's demand for practical understanding is a political and social one.⁵⁴

Although such ideas are often associated with Hegel or Marx *as opposed to* Kant, recent scholarship has made clear that they are just as deeply embedded in Kant's understanding of the political side of the critical project. For Kant too, the self-knowledge of reason is best understood as laying the groundwork for a larger political project – the project, that is, of fully realizing the capacity of reason through the reform of actual human societies so that they better fit with its aspirations towards full (theoretical and practical) understanding and autonomy. It is this “left Kantian” project that Kant's conception of reason naturally leads us to – a project that I hope to shown above remains very viable today.

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⁵³ Compare Nagel(1986).

⁵⁴ Compare the “capabilities approach” to political philosophy pioneered by Nussbaum and Sen in, e.g., (Sen 2004; Nussbaum 2011). See also (McNulty n.d.) and Bagnoli(2022) for a related discussion of this sort of “left Kantianism”.

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