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Who? How and How Much? When and Where? On Why We Need to Be Pragmatic about Critique

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Abstract

As critique appears to have run out of steam, become a culprit in the culture wars, and a source of capitalization in the marketplace of social media prestige, the following discussion embraces these dynamics not as epiphenomena to be overcome but as critical styles that can be restyled within a consequentialist and pragmatist frame. Dramatizing critique in this way shifts the methodological focus away from the redemptive gesture that guides the critique of critique toward the creative exploration of what can be done to make critique work within the gamified battlefield of contemporary social media environments. Doing so invites a provocative change of critical tone, reflections upon who counts as a critic, and an encounter with everyday moral calculations. It culminates in a deflationary image of critique as everyday practice.

Keywords

Critique, Postcritique, Dramatization, Pragmatism, Utilitarianism, Consequentialism, Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche, Galen Strawson

In the introduction to their edited collection, *Critique and Postcritique*, Anker and Felski astutely begin their remarks with the following reflection: "It would have been hard to imagine, only a few years ago, that the idea of postcritique would be gaining significant traction…in the midst of a recalibration of thought and practice whose consequences

are difficult to predict" (2017: 1). Perhaps the time of critique is passing us by, and the critic is no longer adequately adapted to the current environment? Presciently, in his essay 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', Bruno Latour (2004) gave one influential account of why it might be that, what he calls, 'the critical spirit' has found itself in an unmistakably hostile environment; that of 'war'. He writes:

> Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm? What has become of the critical spirit? Has it run out of steam? (2004: 225).

Almost twenty years later, the wars continue to flare up, take on new forms with the rise of social media and, in consequence, 'trouble' what we typically mean by critique (Phelan, 2023: 14). This troubling tendency to turn critical engagement into a battlefield may be the result of a more general 'gamification' of everyday communication encouraged and sustained through platforms such as Twitter (Nguyen, 2021). Indeed, as gamified communication increasingly turns critical engagements into online war games, it is no surprise that we tend to engage in contemporary forms of mediatized politics and critique with a view to maximizing our critical capital (Holm, 2020). Latour's prescience has become our social media reality and critical thought seems to have not only run out of steam but become a gamified battlefield he could barely have imagined at the time. For all that this battlefield does occasionally produce courageous attempts at reaching across the communicative trenches (Maddox and Creech, 2021), it tends more often to turn critique into 'moral outrage porn' (Nguyen and Williams, 2020). Anker and Felski's (2017) invitation to consider how we might recalibrate critique in literary and cultural studies, therefore, is a timely reflection on scholarly practice when, amongst other things, mediatized critical thinking has become embedded in social life as a conflictual game with winners and losers.

If the notion of postcritique is on the table, therefore, then this is for primarily sociological and practical reasons. While the philosophical hunt for the conditions of our experience always had a social dimension – think of Kant's framing of the project of critique as the overcoming of indifference borne of a sterile debate between dogmatists and sceptics (1998: 100) – nowadays, it appears that this social function has itself become so sterile that it offers nothing with respect to how we may legitimately claim to know anything at all: the very problem of indifference that motivated Kant in the first place is with us once again, only critique itself is the source of the problem.[1] For Latour, the solution is to recalibrate the social function of intellectual inquiry toward matters of care and concern, rather than critique. It is a sidestep familiar within the critical tradition. However, let us be clear: Latour and those critics inspired by his work are obviously aware of the dangers of falling into the post-Kantian trap of 'performative contradiction'.[2] They recognize that challenging critique risks turning into a form of critique. But rather than pursue the philosophical gesture of examining the conditions of conditions of conditions and so on, theirs is a practical gesture that aims to leave infinite regress to others. Toward the end of his discussion, Latour frames the problem thus: "The practical problem we face…is to associate the word criticism with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions, habits of thoughts" (2004: 247). So maybe it is not so much that critique has 'run out of steam', but that new critical modalities oriented toward practice need to be explored, from within our contemporary expression of indifference, the gamified battlefield. This is a sentiment echoed by Felski (2015) when she invokes a rather famous moment of critical thought: it may be that "the point, in the end, is not to redescribe or reinterpret critique, but to change it" (193). That all sounds very nice, but what could it mean?

One answer is provided by Celikates (2018) who, it is worth remarking, is embedded in the same tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory that equally animates Felski's perspective: "we should understand the different versions of critical theory […] as specific forms of social practice – not only because most of their argumentative strategies can also be found in everyday critical discourses (at least in rudimentary form), but also because critical social theory fundamentally understands itself as a specific form of practice that is anchored in and oriented towards everyday practice" (172). This is a powerfully expressed understanding of the potential of Critical Theory

to renew itself. However, as this quote already suggests, Celikates' attempt to embed critique in everyday life to find the resources with which it may be revitalized already carries with it a lot of baggage. Critique as a social practice already assumes the priority of 'argumentative strategies', that these strategies are, to differing degrees, 'rudimentary' in everyday life such that critical theory can make them less so where appropriate, and that critical practice oriented to developing these less rudimentary forms of argument must be 'anchored' in social life. All of which is to say that there is a rather overwhelming sense of the unquestioned normativity of the social; that is, that our social relations can, with the help of critique, be brought to self-understanding about the norms which govern them such that we can change them for the better. While this is entirely in keeping with a version of Frankfurt School Critical Theory brought down to earth, it is too much baggage to carry around if we take seriously the idea that postcritique requires shedding assumptions that have led us into our current critical malaise in the first place: such as the assumptions about argumentation, the haughty attitude of the critic and the nature of the relationships which ought to shape our lives, which are the contested content of much of the gamified battlefield that orients our critical practice in the discursive spaces of social media. Instead of this baggage we would suggest picking up Celikates' offer to orient ourselves toward *everyday* practice, where the 'trite and trivial connections' of our everyday lives hold political significance all too often missed by haughty and loaded appeals to the social (Porter, 2018). As we understand it, the 'everyday' holds the social (and the individual) in suspension while we pause for breath given critical exhaustion. That said, it won't be a long pause unless we further suspend Celikates' claim about the normative potential of the social as the new energy source for critical practice. Instead, we suggest turning the matter on its head, to situate the normative potential of critical gestures within everyday practices, including those expressed through the gamified battlefield of social media. With this in mind, we also suggest a methodological twist on Celikates' (all-too) Habermasian assumptions about more pragmatic understandings of critique and social criticism. For us, the concept of critique (like any concept) can only take on a practical significance when it is dramatized in everyday life (MacKenzie and Porter, 2011).

As we have emphasized in our previous work, we take our inspiration from Deleuze (and Guattari). In 'The Method of Dramatization', Deleuze (2004) opens the argument

up in the following way: "It is not certain that the question what is? is a good question…It is possible that questions of the type: who?, how much?, how?, where?, when? are better…" (94). As such, dramatization is precisely not a search for essence but an invitation to consider whether concepts have a value and function in the contemporary world, for whom and to what extent. Coupled with the methodological claim that one must change the world to know it, dramatization is a creative endeavour, one that must invoke a style. Our way of reading Deleuze's remark, therefore, is to emphasize genre rather than the generic. 'What is?' questions are generic: tending towards abstraction, they lack a certain imagination, and all too quickly become predictable, unoriginal, at their worst stupid.[3] Questions of the type who?, how much?, how?, where?, when? are more recognizable as *genre specific*; they offer better possibilities for feeling the grit and grain of the things they bring into view; at their best, such questions have an expressiveness, a particular style, an aesthetic quality and resonance that better captures the imagination without presuming the (rudimentary) normativity of the social. In the main body of the article, we aim to dramatize critique by running it through questions of the type suggested by Deleuze: w*ho? how and how much? when and where?* In our concluding remarks, we show that the purpose of doing so is to underline why we need to be pragmatic about the concept of everyday critique and the normative potential it may contain.

Who?

Posing the question of the 'who?' of critique is syntactically and semantically awkward; it's a philosopher's question, in a bad sense, because it betrays a certain prejudice or tendency to confuse. This desire to confuse can take many forms, and many of these forms can involve mischief, if not downright malice. In Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, in the section titled 'On the Prejudices of the Philosophers', he draws attention to what he considers the playful misbehaviours or "superstitions of the logicians" (1990: 47). Beneath such superstitions, says Nietzsche, is a "concise little fact" that the logician is loathed to admit - 'namely, that thought comes when "it" wants, not when "I" want; so it is a falsification of the facts to say: the subject "I" is the condition of the predicate "think". It thinks:" (47). In fact, Nietzsche (1990) continues:

> but that this "it" is precisely that famous old "I" is, to put it mildly, only
> an assumption, an assertion, above all not an "immediate certainty". For
> even with this "it thinks" one has already gone too far: this "it" already
> contains an *interpretation* of the event and does not belong to the event
> itself. The inference here is in accordance with the habit of grammar:
> thinking is an activity, to every activity pertains one who acts, consequently
> (47).

What we would like to do is flesh out, in our own terms, how Nietzsche's remarks above can begin to help us dig into the 'who' of critique in a bit more detail. It is perhaps useful to start by emphasizing that in focusing on grammatical habit or customary ways of talking, Nietzsche immediately, as a matter of practical necessity, forces us to put a question mark against the 'who', a question mark that is never erased as such, but only fades into this or that background, a background itself cast in light and shade by way of the figure of the 'who' that emerges from it. This is all very wordy and abstract, so let us follow Nietzsche's suggestion and think about it in a more customary or everyday fashion.

<p style="text-align:center">**********************</p>

Imagine a person, an academic, on a plane contemplating a twelve-hour flight to a conference. He is supposed to be flying out of London Heathrow to Buenos Aries. Instead, he and the other passengers remain grounded on the runway. Whether to stave off nerves, or simply to distract himself, he decides to start tweeting out remarks, ideas, arguments that he intends to make at the conference: essentially, he starts to live-tweet his paper in advance of the conference event. Being a certain vintage or age, and new as he is to Twitter, he is generally rather unguarded and louche in how he goes about communicating with his 135 followers. Let's imagine he is a left-Nietzschean cultural studies academic and the paper he is scheduled to deliver is a kind of performance piece, an aphoristic satire of everything he considers objectionable about some 'right-wing' or 'populist' figure. Over the next hour, he starts knocking out the tweets. The first tweet is the longest and explains to everyone the conceit of the paper, thereby contextualizing the subsequent aphoristic tweets to come, the supposedly comically incoherent and self-defeating ramblings of the satirized 'right-

wing' or 'populist' figure. All together twelve tweets go out before finally the plane takes off…

In the air now, our left-Nietzschean helps himself to some complimentary Jack Daniels and coke and contentedly drifts off to sleep. Little did he know…

On arrival in Buenos Aires, Dr left-Nietzsche connects to the airport Wi-Fi to discover that one of his tweets has, as they customarily say, 'gone viral'. In the space of twelve hours literally thousands of people have set about castigating, retweeting, judging, berating, goading, threatening and poking fun at him for his 'racist' and 'sexist' remarks. Devastated and discombobulated, he nonetheless continues to scroll through this swamp of invective. Things take a dark turn as he realizes that some responses and retweets include veiled threats against him, others seem intent on involving his employers, in particular the 'People and Culture' department at his home academic institution. These 'People and Culture' tweets seem to have really snowballed because of a particular tweet from a well-known public intellectual, Professor X from a Russell Group London University. Irony of ironies, Dr left-Nietzsche is a huge admirer of Professor X, indeed, the author of one of the first monographs on the work of Professor X. The tweet from the latter simply reads: 'I thought you were one of us? Disgusting!!!' Things take yet a darker turn when Dr left-Nietzsche finally pulls himself away from his twitter feed to look at his email. Scanning nervously, he immediately zeros in on two messages marked 'urgent'. One is from the university hosting the conference, the other is from the 'People and Culture' department of his own institution. Expelled from the conference and suspended from work, Dr left-Nietzsche's shame crushes in on him. He decides it is best that he come off Twitter altogether and exits the platform with the following tweet: 'I feel awful and ashamed that my stupidity caused so much upset to so many people. I wholeheartedly apologize for the morally reprehensible way I acted and am truly embarrassed and upset by my actions. No excuses, I'm an idiot and take full responsibility for what I did.'

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So 'who', precisely, does this imagined scenario bring to mind. Is 'who' a critic in this context? Which one? Dr left-Nietzsche? The Twitter mob? The conference convenor? The Twitter machine? The Head of People and Culture at Dr left-Nietzsche's

workplace? Professor X? The answer to these questions is undoubtedly yes, and in every case. Yes, but in the context of… Or, as Nietzsche may say, in the situation of 'the one who acts, consequently…'. What we mean to say is that we can clearly make a case for each 'which one' identified. As an agent, Dr left-Nietzsche acted, those actions were critical, in a sense, and they were certainly consequential. The same can be said for the Twitter mob, Professor X, the conference convenor, and the Twitter machine. All function actively and in ways that can be critically cashed out in consequences of various types. Now, to speak, as we just have, about critique in terms of an activity that can be cashed out in consequences is, from a Nietzschean perspective, merely habit, a customary or everyday way of talking, a religious way of talking and a scientistic or reductively materialist or mechanistic way of talking. For notions like 'agency' and 'consequences' imply something like 'autonomy' on the part of the subject engaging in critique (the 'I' somehow abstracted from the things yet acting on things). What this everyday way of talking also presupposes is a world of 'cause' and 'effect', the self-generative force of the critique and its consequent outcome (the 'it' transformed by the 'I' who brings 'it' about). As is well known, the idea of a self-generative subject (critical or otherwise) is wilfully targeted by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*. This is the famous critique of the 'causa sui' in section twenty-one, the passage beloved by 'free will' sceptics and 'moral responsibility' sceptics everywhere. It is worth quoting Nietzsche (1990) at length here:

> The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction hitherto imagined… For the desire for 'freedom of will' in that metaphysical superlative sense which is unfortunately still dominant in the minds of the half-educated, the desire to bear the whole and sole responsibility for one's actions and to absolve God, world, ancestors, chance, society from responsibility for them, is nothing less than the desire to be precisely that *causa sui* and…to pull oneself into existence out of a swamp of nothingness by one's own hair. Assuming it is possible in this way to get beyond the…simplicity of this celebrated concept "free will" and banish it from one's mind, I would then ask whoever does that to carry his "enlightenment" a step further and also banish from her mind the contrary…: "unfree will", which amounts to an abuse of cause and effect. One ought not to make "cause" and "effect" *into material things*, as natural scientists do (and those who, like them,

naturalize in their thinking), in accordance with the prevailing mechanistic stupidity which has the cause press and push until it "produces an effect"; one ought to employ "cause" and "effect" only as pure concepts, that is to say as conventional fictions for the purposes of designation, mutual understanding, not explanation…It is we alone who have fabricated causes, succession, reciprocity, relativity, compulsion, number, law, freedom, motive, purpose; and when we falsely introduce this world of symbols into things and mingle it with them as though this symbol-world were an "in itself", we once behave as we have always behaved, namely, *mythologically*…(50-51).

The 'who' of critique seems to dissolve before our very eyes if what Nietzsche says here pulls on our critical intuitions in any significant way. Most immediately, the 'who' of critique appears to assume a truly mythical-religious burden of responsibility, or the inculcation of a 'desire to bear the whole and sole responsibility for one's actions and to absolve God, world, ancestors, chance, society from responsibility for them'. Now, if Nietzsche is successful in convincing us that we can never be wholly and solely responsible for what we do, then the moral and political landscape takes on quite a discombobulating hue. Are we really saying that our everyday moral talk and assumptions about 'blame' and 'praise' don't really stand up to any kind of critical scrutiny? Are we ready to bite that bullet?

In his provocative and engaging paper, 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility', Galen Strawson (1994) does precisely this. Glossing (more or less) the same section of Nietzsche's *Beyond and Good Evil* quoted immediately above, Strawson stakes out his claim thus:

we are what we are, and we cannot be thought to have made ourselves *in such a way* that we can be held to be free in our actions *in such a way* that we can be held to be morally responsible for our actions *in such a way* that any punishment or reward for our actions is ultimately just or fair…[I]f one takes the notion of justice that is central to our intellectual and cultural tradition seriously, then the evident consequence…is that there is a fundamental sense in which no punishment or reward is ever ultimately just. It is exactly as just to punish or reward people for their actions as it

is to punish or reward them for the (natural) colour of their hair or the (natural) shape of their faces (15-16).

Now, imagine how this claim would play out on twitter? Imagine Dr left-Nietzsche not as the cultural studies academic but as an 'analytic' philosopher and 'moral responsibility sceptic' in the manner of Strawson. Imagine Dr left-Nietzsche defying his critics by tweeting out what Strawson calls his 'Basic Argument' which, for the latter, conceptually clinches, from the armchair so to speak, the essential truth concerning the 'impossibility of moral responsibility'. Imagine Dr left-Nietzsche drip feeding the following eight tweets, no context provided, all cut and paste word for word from the 'Basic Strawsonian Argument'. Here are Strawson's actual, very tweetable, words:

1. You do what you do because of the way you are.

So

2. To be truly morally responsible for what you do you must be truly responsible for the way you are - at least in certain crucial mental respects.

But

3. You cannot be truly responsible for the way you are, so you cannot be truly responsible for what you do.

Why can't you be truly responsible for the way you are? Because

4. To be truly responsible for the way you are, you must have intentionally brought it about that you are the way you are, and this is impossible.

Why is it impossible? Well, suppose it is not. Suppose that

5. You have somehow intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are, and that you have brought this about in such a way that you can now be said to be truly responsible for being the way you are now.

For this to be true

6. You must already have had a certain nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are as you now are.

But then

7. For it to be true you and you alone are truly responsible for how you now are, you must be truly responsible for having had the nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are.

So

8. You must have intentionally brought it about that you had that nature N, in which case you must have existed already with a prior nature in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you had the nature N in the light of which you intentionally brought it about that you are the way you now are … (13-14).

Although written in the early 1990s, Strawson's 'Basic Argument' as articulated above reads like a contemporary twitter thread. In this regard, it is hard not to view the provocation of his remarks with a kind of comic, even wistful or nostalgic, sense of loss, to see the intellectual-moral power of the 'if-then' logic on show as something completely submerged in the invective swamp of twitter opinion. This much heralded and praised contemporary philosopher – the man Ian McEwan described as 'one of the cleverest men alive' – would barely last five minutes if he plugged into the Twitter machine.

How? and how much?

However, if a moral responsibility sceptic like Strawson is right, and right for the Nietzschean reasons given above, then this would seem to leave us in something of a muddle. For how could we even begin to think of providing any kind of workable notion of critique without an implied sense of moral responsibility? Surely critique presupposes an agent of sorts, acting with some degree of autonomy on the world and in accordance with a certain kind of value-orientation?

What if we tried to change the terms of the problem? What if we could sidestep the philosophical problem of the 'who' of critique, given its deep entanglement in a Nietzschean or Strawsonian web of 'free will and moral responsibility scepticism', and instead focus, more pragmatically perhaps, on the 'how' of critique? What if we thought of the 'how' in methodological terms, a mode of inquiry that could help us understand better the activity of critique, giving us a more clear-headed sense of the consequences that ought to follow from such critical activity? In other words, what if we turned in a broadly consequentialist or utilitarian direction.

Speaking very schematically, utilitarianism suggests we are calculating creatures with the intuitive potential and capacity to engage in moral reasoning of the most generalizable kind. In practical terms, this utilitarian metaphysic of morals famously cashes out in (the much trumpeted and much derided) principle of acting to contribute to 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. In this way, read positively, the utilitarian response to the problem of the 'who' of critique could run along the following lines: the long running, perennially perplexing, philosophical drama of 'free will and moral responsibility scepticism' can be pragmatically set aside as we focus on the *consequences* of critique and how we think about their moral justification considering such *consequences*. So (to come back to the bewildered Dr left-Nietzsche scrolling through his twitter feed in the arrivals lounge of the Ezeiza International Airport in Buenos Aires), the key things to focus on are both the *practical consequences* and the *moral lessons* to be taken from the unfortunate episode, understood in their most generalizable terms. Questions of blame-worthy or praise-worthy agentic action necessarily fade into the background as we crank into gear the great hedonic calculating machine. Of course, the utilitarian is the first to admit that such an arithmetic task is necessarily complicated, multiple, and many-sided, but it is a calculation or series of calculations we can nonetheless make.

We can think of the nitty gritty of these calculations as an example of the 'how much' of critique, as the weighing of consequences in favour of the most generalizable, rational or – as some utilitarians would even have it – most 'objective' moral outcome. A few illustrative examples are probably going to be helpful here. So, with utilitarian calculator to hand, we could speculatively weigh the 'how much' of the action-consequences of various agents as follows.

1. Instead of spending time, energy, money (not to mention the carbon footprint consequence of flying halfway round the world) to attend his conference in Argentina, Dr left-Nietzsche would have been better spending his time figuring out how best to use his time, energy and money in alleviating world poverty and the unhappiness and suffering it causes. That would have contributed better to the greater good or the happiness of the greatest number.

2. Professor X from Russel Group University did a good thing, all things considered, by publicly admonishing Dr left-Nietzsche and declaring to his 6,240 Twitter followers that the latter's actions were 'disgusting'. That is to say, if we can objectively demonstrate that this was the tweet that truly 'went viral', the tweet that cranked the Twitter machine into gear, the tweet that snowballed into a cascade of invective that evidenced the majoritarian value-orientation of the Twitter community's response, then we can rationally argue that this tweet be reasonably calculated or calibrated as an act contributing to the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

3. All things considered, or weighed up in terms of the overall consequences, the decision of The Head of People and Culture at Dr left-Nietzsche's workplace to suspend him is a moral one or is at least morally justifiable. This is evidenced by the fact that Dr left-Nietzsche's host institution's decision or decisive action enabled them to subsequently implement several organizational policies that succeeded over time in reducing the reputational damage to the institution as a totality.

Now, of course, there would be something rather odd or curious about us if we simply digested these examples whole, mechanically retweeting them in our mind, with no thought to their rather abstract, austere, question-begging and even ethically counterfactual or counterintuitive flavour. What such a sense of oddness may give us, though, is a bit of an insight into the real *everyday* provocation of certain 'utilitarian' ways of thinking.

Against 1. we might be tempted to think that the judgment of Dr left-Nietzsche is unduly abstract or not sufficiently anchored in context. Drawing on what moral philosophers sometimes call our 'intuitive reactive attitudes', we might be more tempted to think of Dr left-Nietzsche's actions as unfortunately misguided, naive, or

even a bit stupid. Some of us may think that he bears a degree of responsibility in foolishly setting himself up for a fall. Some of us may think that he even deserved some harsh criticism for what he did. Some of us may even think he deserved to be excluded from the conference and suspended from his job. But it is doubtful that very many of us (minus those philosophers passionately committed to living up to the rather austere demands of utilitarian morality) would automatically or initially judge him on such globally absolutist terms.

Against 2. our, perhaps more intuitive, reaction to Professor X's tweet may be that he was a little too keen to rush to judge Dr left-Nietzsche, especially given their mutual acquaintance. Indeed, some of us may well be at a loss to understand why Professor X was so ready to immediately accept the tweets at face-value, rather than seeing them as intentionally funny, sarcastic, ironic or whatever. Most of us would probably conclude from this that Professor X is rather naive when it comes to understanding the performative culture of Twitter, a culture in which satire, comedy, piss-taking, provocation abound. So, instead of seeing Professor X's tweet as something good, we could, on the other hand, see it as rigid, decontextualized, impatiently austere, even as crude 'virtue signalling'. These things we might recognize (again the 'we' being those of us more familiar with Twitter culture) as some of the more unsavoury aspects of social media. For it seems that for every funny, sarcastic, ironic piss-taker on Twitter, we also have a po-faced moralist keen to grandstand and show the world how ethically superior they are. Again, it is doubtful that very many of us (minus those philosophers passionately committed to living up to the rather austere demands of utilitarian morality) would naturally judge Professor X's actions as unproblematically positive. But, remember the provocation calculatively implied by 2. The calculation is this: a) if the majoritarian value-orientation of the Twitter publics responding to Dr left-Nietzsche is clearly evidenced in the cascade of invective they heaped upon him; b) and the 'viral' tweet from Professor X set in motion a process that led inexorably to a); c) then, Professor X's tweet can be morally justified as 'good'.

Against 3. we might well wonder whether Dr left-Nietzsche's suspension from work inevitably led to the best, most rationally justifiable, outcome. The outcome might be a good one from an institutional perspective, but doesn't 'good' here mean something like 'practically useful', 'strategically efficacious' or simply 'prudential'? Yes, it is a good

outcome for the institution in as much as it reduces reputational damage, but where's the moral here, we may ask, especially if we have any sympathy for Dr left-Nietzsche in this context? Again, we might be tempted to say that, sure, he was stupid, but his intentions were not objectively malicious (unless you think satirizing right-wing populists is an objectively abhorrent thing to do) and that the invective he received from the Twitter mob was more than enough punishment for his sins. Is there really any moral case, utilitarian or otherwise, to be made for suspending him from work? These questions seem intuitively reasonable, but there is a way that a utilitarian could work to counter our intuitions. That's to say, a utilitarian has the intellectual resources to engage in some creative accounting when facing such suspicions or concerns. The calculation could run like this: d) even though it seems reasonable to calculate that Dr left-Nietzsche's suspension from work is rather harsh or even disproportionate; e) it is worth bearing in mind the overall consequences of the institutional decision, assuming we rationally accept that the good of the institution as a totality must, on utilitarian grounds, override more individual considerations. f) Therefore, we must bite the bullet and land wherever the rational adjudication of competing goods takes us and that g) must always imply a form of reasoning calculatively guided by the principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'.

When and where?

Undoubtedly, utilitarians direct their hands to the web of our everyday experience, touching it in a way that resonates through us and can often trouble our more immediate reactive attitudes, our quotidian and banal sense of things. However, we don't need to be close readers of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* or well-versed in the free-will and moral responsibility scepticism of a philosopher like Galen Strawson to experience a nagging feeling that something is not quite right when confronted by a form of critique (any form of critique) that seems so morally sure of itself. With Nietzsche we intuitively know that critique implies values, a weighing of values, constant contestation, evaluation and re-evaluation of values, but where does this leave us, experientially, in the rough and tumble of our everyday lives? Utilitarianism is a powerful and seductive response to the nagging sense that any so called 'proper', 'objective' or 'rational' justification of critique is nothing more than a pipe dream, a

'conventional fiction', to use the Nietzschean phrasing from earlier. Indeed, we suggested how a utilitarian approach could be seen to sidestep the problem of the 'who' of critique by framing the problem differently. From a certain utilitarian perspective, we should not get hung up on the philosophical drama of free-will/moral responsibility and essentially get out of the business of intuitive or reactive praising and blaming. This is critical! Who did what to who, whose critique of who, who takes offence at who, the critical evaluation of agentic action from whoever, shouldn't be our overriding concern. On this view, judging the activities of the 'who' as specific agents or objects of critique can all too quickly run to ground, getting us stuck in a swamp of messy moral relativism. The utilitarian hope, of course, is we emerge from this swamp, moral and rational calculator in hand, and can climb up to the vantage point of the 'impartial spectator'. Again, whatever the philosophical problems associated with such a demanding and austere task, and whatever suspicions we have about ever achieving such an impartial view, it is important, we would argue, to understand the intuitive moral pull of such a possibility, especially when it is glossed in the service of the principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'.

Clearly more could be said about why we think the utilitarian principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' has an intuitive pull on us in our everyday life. Perhaps one way to think about this is historically and culturally. We could think of this as relating to the problem of the 'when and where' of critique. It is hardly going to come as a galloping shock to anyone that the utilitarian principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' is the product of a certain kind of modern 'enlightenment' thinking; more particularly, English, Scottish, and Northern Irish, 'enlightenment' philosophy. The 'enlightened' English (Bentham and Mill) and their fellow Scots (Hume and Smith) are undoubtedly more well-known than the Northern Irish philosopher Francis Hutcheson, but the notion of the 'impartial spectator' alluded to above is his. Further, Hutcheson is often credited as the very first to employ the principle 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number', found, as it is, in his pithily entitled book of 1725: namely, *The Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (Hutcheson, [1725] 2004: 125).

By thinking forward from the proto-utilitarianism of Hutcheson to the present day, or from the grand institutional, legislative and correctional ambitions of Bentham's

eighteenth-century 'hedonic calculus' to the contemporary promise of things like 'augmented utilitarianism' (Aliman et al, 2019), understood as a form of digital architecture that can encode legal and moral decision-making in machine readable form, we can clearly see the continuing power and attraction of calculating machines. Even as we recognize the histories of utilitarian thinking as complicatedly caught up in a web of Empire, racial capitalism, even slavery, we are still susceptible to their potential utility in the present, to the promise of a cost/benefit analysis minus racism, minus the worst excesses of capitalism, one that can critically account for animal cruelty or whatever else we calculate out as morally objectionable. It is hard to dispense completely with the calculator, not simply because we live in a calculative world, but because maths is useful; numbers allow us to do stuff, reform things. Whatever our philosophical reservations, the normative pull of the 'consequences' of the consequentialist and the 'utility' of the utilitarian is hard to shake.

In his essay, 'The Harm that Good Men Do', Bertrand Russell provides his *Harper's Magazine* readers of the 1920s with a hilariously two-faced assessment of (particularly Benthamite) utilitarianism. On the one hand, Benthamism is clearly seen as an engine of progressive social reform in nineteenth century Britain in as much as it influences legislation such as the Great Reform Acts, the abolition of slavery and the Corn Laws, the reigning in of the death penalty and the introduction of compulsory education. As Russell (2005) explicitly puts it: "A very large proportion of the progress during those years must be attributed to the influence of Bentham. There can be no doubt that nine-tenths of the people living in England in the latter part of the last [i.e., nineteenth] century were happier than they would have been if he had never lived". On the other hand, so "shallow was his philosophy", says Russell, that any intellectual "vindication" of Benthamism should be seen as a "preposterous" acceptance of the worst kind of "grovelling utilitarianism" (Russell, in Schultz and Varouxakis, 2005: 1).

In many ways, Russell's ambivalence is our ambivalence. Equally two-faced, the mixed quality of emotions that play through our articulations of 'utility' are anything but straightforward. Whether we like it or not, we are calculating machines, the 'when and where' of critique undoubtedly implies the calculation of consequences. If acknowledging that makes us part-time utilitarians, then so be it. But we would like to complicate this picture somewhat, and muddy the already swampy water. For 'part-

time utilitarian' does not mean 'crypto-utilitarian'. Consider the hyper-voluntarist, bullet-biting austerity of a card carrying 'utilitarian' who shows absolute commitment to following inexorably wherever the calculus leads? The rhetorical power of the bullet-biting card-carrying utilitarian is reflected in their ability to exchange any value we might champion in the name of critique ('freedom', 'justice', 'creativity', 'the people', 'God', 'the supreme leader', 'transvaluation of value', 'common good', 'the moral law within'…) into 'utility'. One of the strongest strikes against those who profess an uneasiness within utilitarianism is to exchange their cherished, supposedly non-utilitarian, value into the 'utility of the maximal good'. The argument could run like this: 'Ah, so you want to champion a romantic critical transvaluation of value à la Nietzsche, but really all you are doing in practical terms is arguing for the utility of it as maximally good/best/greatest!' Or, the argument could run like that: 'Ok, so you want to hyperbolically claim that a theological leap of faith or a teleological suspension of the ethical is the only thing that will save us from an all-too-human absurdity, but, rationally speaking, this will nowhere connect meaningfully to our everyday experience unless it is consequently cashed out in its maximal utility!'

You get the idea. The rhetorical power of the utilitarian to re-describe the professed non-utilitarian as a crypto-utilitarian is seen by the former as a kind of virtuously circular chain of reasoning. Can we then say that, in this sense, critique is the eternal return of utility?

We do not think so. Put simply, we can be part-time utilitarians without necessarily falling prey to an unacknowledged crypto-utilitarianism. We can do this in two ways: first, to embed the value of utility in the everyday and respect it as a complicated part of this everyday logic of critique; second, to consider the normative outcomes of this in the form of, what Todd May (1995) has called, 'multivalue consequentialism'. Regarding the first of these claims, we recognize what we would call the *pragmatic function of calculative utility*, how it might be pressed into the service of critique, but without necessarily going the whole hog to absolutize it as such. Now, of course, the cereal-box or generic version of utilitarianism we have presented here comes nowhere close to even beginning to capture the multiplicity of various utilitarianisms out there (see Eggleston and Miller, 2014). Naturally, given this, we shouldn't be surprised that when different utilitarian critics or thinkers run the numbers they can often come to

radically different framings of problems, proposed solutions, practical outcomes. Simplistically crude or not, all we want to argue here is that any general attempt to absolutize 'utility' is an abstraction we could do well without.[4] Secondly, embedding the value of utility in our everyday lives without treating it as a 'rudimentary' form of argumentation brings our argument into line with a broader sense of 'multivalue consequentialism' that sits within the everyday and can be used as a source for the construction of an everyday normativity. In contrast to crude forms of consequentialism, and crude forms of utilitarianism, that evaluate consequences against a single value (happiness, productivity etc.) a multivalue approach, as outlined by May, means that 'an act can be right to the extent that it contributes to a value, wrong to the extent that it detracts from another. What ultimately determines its rightness over its wrongness is the relative weight of the values to which it contributes or detracts and the amount of contribution and detraction involved' (1995: 91). In this way, we can see that the normative potential of the everyday should also be treated as a matter of 'how much', always with a healthy dose of 'when and where'. Faced with the obvious retort – 'but how are these assessments to be made?' – the response is that it must be a matter of 'practical judgement' (1995: 92). This brings us to our concluding thoughts.

Conclusion

If there is but one lesson to be taken from our remarks above, it is this: *we need to be pragmatic when thinking about the concept of critique*. The task of a new form of critique, one that has been changed rather than reinterpreted, in other words, is to clarify what we mean by critique in terms of its practical effects without the presumptions of normatively loaded ideals of social practice. In this sense, *we are proposing critique as everyday practice*. We meander through everyday life and assume that the business of critique presupposes a bunch of 'who's', agentic actions, a story of 'who did what to who'. With Nietzsche (and with apologies to moral realists, objectivists and universalists everywhere), we immediately sense that this story is a morally pluralist one, implying a politically contested struggle over 'values'. We intuitively recognize that 'who did what to who' is a story that can be told from a number of different sides,

cashed out in different ways, calculated differently. The 'who' is a problem that eternally returns…

That said, pressed too hard with too militant a consistency, the Nietzschean (and Strawsonian) scepticism of the 'who' of critique would seem to reason the critic out of existence altogether. This, for us, goes a bit too far. From our perspective, what is needed here is a degree of ingenuity in developing context-specific rules of thumb, recognizing that such rules of thumb are themselves anchored in given 'reactive attitudes', attitudes that are themselves given in and through the contexts of their expression. It's all a bit of a muddle, to be sure, but this is how we tend to muddle through our everyday lives. In this way, our remarks above concerning the 'blame-worthy' or 'praise-worthy' actions of Dr left-Nietzsche et al are characteristic of this kind of practical reasoning, the weighing of values, or, in our pop-Deleuzian terms, they are a question of 'how?' and 'how much?'. They indicate that a renewed critique today, when generic criticism is running out of steam, must be a matter of genre; that is, style not concern. Thinking about the hyper-discursive context of our current gamified battlefield, we can say that the task is not to lament the lost social in the hope of reinvigorating it, but of charting the everyday life of our hyper-discursive communication in order to style it differently within the game.

As suggested above, utilitarianism, broadly understood, is an interesting, powerful and seductive response to our rather deflationary pragmatic suggestion of muddling through. The methodological 'how?' (the calculative inquiry concerning maximal utility) and the rational weighing of 'how much? (the nitty gritty arithmetic of running the numbers) are precisely designed to get us out of the muddle. As you can hopefully see from our reflections above, we do not think they can. Taking our inspiration from Dr left-Nietzsche, perhaps, we wanted to restyle or, in other words, satirize a style of quasi-mathematical or axiomatic argumentation that we find in certain contemporary currents of utilitarianism and in normative ethics more generally (argument 1, 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d…3, etc.) in order to dramatize its often abstract, austere, exhausting and question-begging quality and tone. Philosophical critique as a kind of Twitter thread that…rather…too…quickly…exhausts…itself…in…the…logic…of…if…then…

From our pragmatic perspective, there will always be a potential mismatch between any critical outcome that is said to follow from running the utilitarian numbers and the

values we bring into play in muddling through. Put simply, we could run the numbers in such a way that Dr left-Nietzsche, Professor X, the Twitter mob, or whoever is cast in either a positive or negative critical light. The problem for us, here, is that the sharp binarism of the utilitarian calculator, the zero or hero of utilitarian calculation, cannot really get to grips with the messy business of the 'how?' and 'how much?' understood within the framework of a multivalue consequentialism.

That said, any such form of practical reasoning, any such critical gesture, clearly implies calculative utility. As such, we must remain part-time utilitarians, especially when utility is so potent a value in our everyday life. The question of the 'when and where' of critique significantly remains a 'utilitarian' question. Our position, to repeat, is simply to refrain from absolutizing calculative utility. Recognizing what we are calling the pragmatic function of calculative utility, (say, in coming to a context-specific pragmatic judgment that Dr left-Nietzsche was a bit of an idiot to 'ironically' tweet 'right-wing', 'populist' ideology on social media, while, at the same time, calculating that the consequences that followed from his actions seem somewhat unfortunate or even disproportionate…), without falling prey to its absolutization is no easy matter or task. But rarefied philosophical language-games that insist on redeeming such rudimentary everyday values in normatively over-coded accounts of the social only make matters worse by further contributing to the milieu that makes critique itself a source of the indifference that marks social criticism today.[5] The seductive promise of critical theory, of course, is wrapped up in the thought of a final escape from the messy swamps of our particular, parochial, context-dependent 'reactive attitudes'. The usual old chestnut of 'relativism' suggests itself here. Sorry, but unless you have a pragmatic sensibility like us, you will be unsatisfied with our predictable response to the familiar charge or problem of 'relativism'. For saying something is relative to something else is simply a way of talking that begs the question 'relative to what?'.[6] You'll perhaps remember that what? questions, for us, tend towards abstraction; in this particular case, implying the thing that the 'relative' is relative to is the 'absolute', the 'universal', the 'general', the 'objective' or some such concept that stands in for that something more than a 'mere relativism', 'particularism', 'contextualism', 'subjectivism' or whatever.

For us, notions like 'absolute', 'universal', 'objective' simply fail to connect anywhere to our experiences of practical critical reasoning, to the rough and tumble of the

everyday life in which we do this thing called 'critique'. This is why we need to be more deflationary, humble, more pragmatic in our understanding of critique as everyday practice. For the only other option is to succumb to the seductive thrall of what the great pragmatist Charles Sanders Pierce (1932) called "vagabond thoughts that tramp the public highways without any human habitation" (112).

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Notes

[1] Some of the philosophical, rather than sociological, ramifications of this dilemma are explored in MacKenzie (2022), 'Critique in an Age of Indifference'.

[2] This 'post-Kantian' trap was most famously laid by Jürgen Habermas his 1987 work *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

[3] Stupidity is developed, initially, in Deleuze (2006) and then throughout his oeuvre. This is further explored in the work of Bernard Stiegler; especially *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century* (2015). A very useful summary of related literature can be found in Lushetich (2022), 'Stupidity: Human and Artificial'.

[4] A point rather beautifully and impressively made by Bernard Williams in what is, for us, one of the most powerful critiques of utilitarianism ever written. In our terms, Williams is an exemplary 'part-time utilitarian': that is, someone who understands what we are calling the pragmatic function of calculative utility without falling prey to an uncritical crypto-utilitarianism. See Williams, 1973.

[5] Phelan (2023) makes a similar point in 'Thesis 6'.

[6] As Richard Rorty (1989: 38) says: 'the pragmatist is not holding a positive theory that says that something is relative to something else…'.

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