**Jeremy Wanderer**

Jeremy Wanderer’s carefully argued paper presents us with a two-prong challenge. First, not unlike Simon Goldhill, he calls us to task for the limited repertoire of potentially ambivalating factors our account allows. If the only way we can change our mind is by confronting a potentially ambivalating portrayal of our core commitments that jars with our own,[[1]](#footnote-1) he argues, why limit such portrayals to those embodied in the critical arguments leveled at us by trusted critics? Normative ambivalence, he submits, “can be brought about in many ways”, that do not rely on argument, and do not resort to reasoning. Goldhill mentions ridicule, bullying, and coercive humor. Wanderer, following Lear, speaks of “the raised eyebrow of the therapist, the silence of a confidant, an inner experience of irony”, or an encounter with an oracle.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Wanderer’s second challenge would seem to go to the very heart of our project, in claiming that we fail to do sufficient justice to the reciprocal interpersonal nature of the very illocutionary act of criticizing on which we base much of our account. To meet Wanderer’s challenges, let us very briefly recapitulate our main argument. To *rationally* change our minds – namely, *to have reason* to replace or modify normative commitments by which we judge – requires to be able to *prospectively* deem them normatively unworthy of our commitment.[[3]](#footnote-3) Since it is logically impossible[[4]](#footnote-4) to ever self-mount such an argument, it would seem, as Rorty argues insistently,[[5]](#footnote-5) that the best we could ever do is to experiment ironically in normative self-re-description with the hope of hitting on an alternative we’d find appealing in retrospect. The sheer outrageousness of such a thought with respect to our epistemic, moral, political and religious norms constitutes the problematic that animates our book. It is a problem that concerns the decidedly *intrapersonal* realm of human agency, human reasoning, and humanly deliberated action, implying an intolerable constraint on our very rationality. It is also a problem, as we show in detail[[6]](#footnote-6), that has stumped the entire philosophical community.

The novel solution proposed in *The View from Within* is to argue that it is possible to achieve the level of self-alienation required for such feats of normative self-critique, but only by exposure to reasoned *external* normative criticism, despite the fact that in principle that too *can never convince*, for exactly the same reason that it is impossible to ever frame such arguments oneself!

We, therefore, have no quarrel at all with Wanderer’s splendid account of the illocutionary speech act in general, or for that of criticizing. In fact we agree with everything his paper claims, except for one thing. The convincing power of critical exchange is limited in principle to non-normative critique, and it is with respect to such necessarily *unconvincing* arguments, that we stake our claim! But, again, we do so without detracting at all from Wanderer’s analysis. When criticizing another person’s norms – as when conservatives criticize liberals for their liberalism – we indeed construct our arguments with a view to convince. The person criticized knows very well that he is being criticized, and expected by his critic to be convinced – just as Wanderer describes. But there is more to convincing than intending it. We can only be convinced by arguments we deem to be not only valid, but sound. Prudent critics know this, and therefore level their critical arguments on the basis of premises to which, they believe, those they criticize assent. In most cases the illocutionary, interpersonal act of criticizing – i.e. when the critic aims to convince, and the person criticized knows this – will not be said to fail if the person criticized fails to be convinced, and responds with a counter-argument. It will be said to fail, only when the person criticized knowingly ignores the argument, or defensively dismisses it.

Normative criticism, and this is the important point, is incapable of convincing, and yet I falls in neither of the two normal categories on two separate counts. First, when criticizing a person’s very norms, there is never available a set of premises that she holds true from which their negation can be shown to follow. This is a matter of logic. Liberalism cannot be refuted solely on the basis of liberal arguments. Second, and this we argue in detail, even if such premises did exist, the person criticized would be unable in principle to accept the argument’s conclusion, even when deeming it logically valid! Arguments considered valid whose conclusions are deemed unacceptable, are what we call paradoxes. Classifying an argument as genuinely paradoxical is to reject its conclusions neither evasively nor defensively. It marks a perplexed suspension of judgment motivated by a firmly reasoned dismissal of its conclusion. Such were Zeno’s famous paradoxes, which were deemed valid arguments for almost two millennia, but failed to convince because their conclusion, the denial of change, was justly deemed to be preposterous! There are clear *normative* limits to the ability of a logical argument to convince – which is what our book is really about.

Wanderer’s analysis and phenomenology of criticizing allows us to far better define and explain the frustratingly narrow wriggle-room we found ourselves left with (which also explains why the problem of normative self-critique, and with it that of the rationality of normative realignment is considered explicitly or implicitly, by almost[[7]](#footnote-7) every philosopher involved to be unsurmountable.

For a normative change of mind to be rational, it must be reasoned.

Norms of true I-part status cannot be self-reasoned against.

They must, therefore, first be *rationally* destabilized – not be means of trauma or manipulation but by force of reasoned, critical argument leveled from without.

Such criticism can never convince, but it can ambivalate.

We can reason against norms to which we’ve become ambivalent.

So, yes, we enlist interpersonal critical discourse in the service of intrapersonal normative realignment. But we do so precisely at the point that latter hits the glass ceiling of normative self-critique, and where Wanderer’s lucid characterization of the former, as an illocutionary interpersonal engagement geared at convincing, collapses. And it is at this point that we are left with ambivalating pictures and two-mindedness, which to be considered rational, however, we insist must be the results of reasoned exchange on either sides of the intra/interpersonal divide.

1. Unlike Goldhill, who seems to accept this premise, which is fundamental to the main argument of our book, Wanderer’s second challenge to us suggests that he rejects it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All three of which, unlike the kind of destabilizing affronts discussed by Goldhill, could well be described as representing reasoned moves in a critical exchange. Even an ambiguous, oracular pronouncement can well be taken in similar fashion. If the recipient of the oracle’s ambiguous message took it as genuinely presenting two equally viable options, she would have no reason to rethink her position. And the same goes for “inner experiences of irony”, which we actually discuss in the book, as when in response to queries, attempts to articulate basics that in one’s home community go without saying, can suddenly sound hollow to one’s ears. But, again, the need to make explicit genuinely taken-for-granted truths only arises in response to prudent questioning. Nonetheless, in what follows we shall grant Wanderer his point, namely, that potentially ambivalating portrayals of one’s core commitments can be encountered, that are neither Goldhill-style affronts, nor moves in a trading-zone-type critical exchange. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A surreptitious change of mind, or one instigated by peer pressure, ridicule or trauma, to may well be justified or deemed advantageous *retrospectively*, but cannot be said to have been undertaken rationally – at least not according to the notion of rationality adopted in our essay. Hence the emphasis on “prospectively”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Because, as a matter of logic, it would have to premiss commitment, on our part, to norms contrary to the the commitments in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See in addition, M. Fisch, *Creatively Undecided*, ch.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Of the few thinkers who explicitly acknowledge the problem, we know of only two substansive works that purport to solve it: Michael Friedman’s *Dynamics of Reason* with respect to Scientific framework replacement, whose work we engage in detail, and Rahel Jaeggi’s, *Critique of Forms of Life,* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018, with respect to social institutions, that was published only recently. Both attempts are highly problematic. The special case Friedman purports to plead for science, begs all the questions we raise regarding *non*-scientific normative transitions, and, as we argue in detail, by limiting his discussion to the problem of rationally *preferring* one framework over an other, leaves wholly unattended that of deeming one’s framework sufficiently wanting to seek for, or develop an alternative.

   Jaeggi’s book strikes deeper, but limits itself to social “forms of life”, which she regards instrumentally as “problem-solving” devices, who, when they malfunction, can be critiqued from within. We hope to engage Jaeggi’s book in greater detail elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)