**Elijah Millgram**

Elijah Millgram’s richly argued paper sets forth from an observation, to which we failed to give due attention. After briefly summarizing our approach, he states in passing that the method of reflective equilibrium has become “a staple of contemporary analytic philosophy”, because our “turn to outside criticism is unlikely to be regarded as a necessary step by much of the analytic mainstream.” In *The View from Within*, as in later work, we acknowledge the psychological difficulties involved in being receptive to criticism in general, and normative criticism in particular. When people committed differently deem our deepest identity-forming normative commitments to be unworthy of our assent we most often react defensively. Michael Walzer, who devoted a book-length study to the potentially transformative force of normative social criticism, refused to classify such dispassionate condemnation, as he called it, as criticism at all. As opposed to the *connected* critic who wins the trust of her society by opposing it from within, addressing it in the first-person plural, he likens detached normative faultfinding from without – Marx being his prime example – a form of warfare, rather than social critique. Effective social criticism, Walzer insists, seeks to improve and amend a *shared* form of life. External, detached criticizers position themselves, by contrast, as enemies of a form of life that is not their own, wishing not to improve, but to overthrow it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Walzer argues the point powerfully, but in primarily sociological and psychological, rather than conceptual philosophical terms. We argue back philosophically in a chapter devoted to a close critique of Walzerian interpretivism. However, we now realize, we failed there to properly appreciate Walzer’s exclusive focus on the effect of external criticism on *collective* as opposed to individual commitment. Looking back, in fact, we end up endorsing his position more than criticizing it.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is most evident in our discussion of scientific framework transitions,[[3]](#footnote-3) in which we clearly distinguish between the creative individuals of standing, ambivalated by the external critique they encounter outside the community at the trading zone, who succeed, upon returning, in setting a framework transition in motion *inside* their communities, by force of the problematically hybridic accounts of the field they produce. Such individuals (our examples included Galileo, Tycho Brahe, George Peacock, Whewell and Poincaré) are Walzerian connected critics par excellence. The only thing we insisted, was that to be rendered ambivalent in the first place, the connected critic herself would have to be exposed to normative criticism, which in principle had to be levelled from without. But that, we now see, was Walzer’s position too! The connected critic, he writes,

Is one of us. Perhaps he has traveled and studied abroad, but his appeal is to local or to localized principles; if he has picked up new ideas in his travels, he tries to connect them to the local culture, building on his own intimate knowledge; he is not intellectually detached. Nor is he emotionally detached …[[4]](#footnote-4)

Our only quarrel with Walzer is to insist that the connected critic is not someone who *may* have, but will have *had to* have traveled or studied abroad; a point that is strongly implied in some of Walzer’s later work.[[5]](#footnote-5)

However, there’s a world of difference between classifying external criticism as communally ineffective, as we do (only physicists can change physics – as a matter of socio-psychological fact), and deeming it, as Walzer does, to be detached and adversarial, in principle. Only closed and highly insecure defensive communities will treat anyone who thinks differently from them as an enemy. Some of course *are* enemies, but not all. The Talmudic literature, which, as one of us argues insistently, is the only major intellectual undertaking knowingly informed by the idea central to our book, that exposure to the echo-chamber of trusted external normative critique is the only way to hold one’s heartfelt commitments in normative check, is an interesting case in point, for it draws the line between trusted external critic and mistrusted foe, more subtly that Walzer. As is well-known, its broad spectrum of disagreement and dispute does not stop at the rabbinic study-hall gates or even those of the community, but extends out to engage a broad array of gentile common folk, aristocrats, military men, administrators, philosophers, legal experts, harlots and emperors, from whom, they believe, much can be learnt.[[6]](#footnote-6) The rabbinic literature of late antiquity certainly treats idolatrous pagan culture as radically different (and, therefore, their criticism, as of unmatched value), but not as posing a religious threat. It is given voice and engaged energetically.[[7]](#footnote-7) Which is not the case with respect to rival late antique *Jewish* non-rabbinic *Jewish* forms of life, such as the Sadducees, the Essenes and the early Christians, whom they viewed as deadly religious adversaries, and in their writings hardly ever openly and meaningfully engage.[[8]](#footnote-8)

By focusing exclusively on social, i.e. communal criticism, and classifying all external criticism as adversarial, Walzer book’s leaves the question of individual normative realignment, and with it, that of accounting for the origin of connected criticism, wholly unattended. Hence, our attempt to drive a wedge along the dividing line of the Talmud’s two forms of external challenge, by classifying potentially effective external critics as *prudent or trusted*. But that’s no more than to give it a name while begging all the questions, especially the question embodied in Millgram’s opening remark.

If Millgram is right - and the more we think about it, he seems to be - then analytic philosophy’s reluctance to assign a necessary role to external critique in rational framework transitions, which he notes without offering an explanation, will have to turn on more than factual assessments of trust and hostility, and of reasonable levels of psychological guardedness in various trading zone settings. What might be the *philosophical* objection to assigning outside criticism a role in rational normative realignment?

To enlarge on a brief comment of ours, and to give Millgram’s observation a little more beef, certainly with respect to the philosophical camp from which we issue forth, we might begin by noting a lacuna with respect to the two main realms of meaningful human discourse. Kant’s first two Critiques, and the contemporary literature they inspire locate the discourse of epistemic and moral norms respectively, squarely within the self. In the former case, between the experiencing subject’s sensibility and understanding; in the latter, between the maxims she sets herself and her attempts to self-legislate more generally. Criticism is wholly limited to *self*-criticism. Some latter-day neo-Kantians (e.g. Brandom, McDowell) extend the discourse from individuals to their likeminded (or language sharing) communities, where criticism is extended to discrepancies between what Robert Brandom dubs normative attitude and normative status, that is to say, between how a norm is understood by an individual and by the likeminded community.

The post-Kantian critiques, especially of Hegel and Fichte, add a substantial intersubjective element to Kant’s wholly intrasubjective account. But there too, as in their latter-day versions the corrective discursive exchange remains limited to the likeminded community; to what Kuhn dubbed “normal” science; to troubleshooting for viability, consistency and coherence within the confines of a shared framework.

For all its subtlety and neo-Hegelian terminology, Brandom’s account of our “critical responsibility” as individuals and communities of speakers to locate and eliminate inconsistencies within our unity of apperception, amounts to little more than the type of reflective equilibrium whose limitations Millgram analyzes so pointedly.[[9]](#footnote-9) For he nowhere even raises the question of the second order standards by which such purging is to be performed, let alone the second-order question of how *those* standards might also be held in normative check. It is one thing to *locate* incompatible commitments, but quite another to correct them. The latter requires normative criteria of preference, weight and priority.

Why then, as Millgram rightly notes, do analytic philosophers ranging from the later Wittgenstein and Kuhn, to Sellars, Brandom, McDowell, Harry Frankfurt, Charles Taylor, Korsgaard and Friedman, all seem to shrink back instinctively from the idea that external criticism can achieve more than keen, honest, in-house *self*-reckoning? Rationality and speech would seem not only to be different, but to pertain to very different realms of human activity: rationality, to the essentially inner realm of intra-subjective thinking and deliberating, reasoning and pondering, choosing and deciding; and speech, to the essentially outer, inter-subjective realm, of our discursive interaction with others; to the dialogical, social space of questioning and answering, addressing and responding, agreeing and disagreeing. The two are obviously connected in that both require language. One cannot rationally weigh and deliberate between incompatible options devoid of language, just as one cannot engage meaningfully in conversation with others without exercising one’s rational capacities.

And the assumption seems to be that self-deliberation and deliberating with others is essentially one and the same; that there is nothing an outsider can tell us that *in principle* we cannot tell ourselves. Others might possess expert knowledge of which we are ignorant, but that is not to transcend the self’s capacity for self-deliberation *in principle*. On the other hand, as we argue in the our book, people who are not likeminded, who are committed to standards of propriety significantly different from our own, can never *convince* us of being wrong. If to be rationally motivated to change our minds, is to be convinced to do so, then external criticism can have no advantage.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is in this sense that the argument we present in *The View from Within* indeed goes against the grain of the entire philosophical tradition to which we are heirs. For it is our firm contention that while incapable of convincing, outside normative criticism, when trusted, is nonetheless capable of *destabilizing* our commitments to the norms it challenges, and rendering us normatively ambivalent toward them, in ways we can never achieve alone. And once ambivalated, we are able appraise them self-critically. It is in this sense, we argue, that there exists a highly significant *philosophical* difference between conversing with ourselves and with others: Others cannot convince us to change our minds, only we can. But we can only do so, after being rendered sufficiently ambivalent, which is something we cannot do, only others!

1. Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, ch.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Our misreading of Walzer turns out to be even worse than that, because rather than engage him directly, we chose as the target of our critique Gopal Sreenivasan’s, “Interpretation and Reason”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 27, 1998, pp. 143-171, which expounds analytically on Walzer’s position wholly inattentive to the difference between individual and collective changes of mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Further elaborated and exemplified with a detailed case-study in Menachem, Fisch, *Creatively Undecided: Toward a History and Philosophy of Scientific Agency*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Walzer, *ibid*, p.39. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See especially his discussion of the essentially western, liberal and secular educational background of the, nonetheless avidly connected, visionaries who led the three national liberation movements studied in his *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, e.g. pp. 16-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For interesting examples see Menachem Fisch, “Gulliver and the Rabbis: Counterfactual Truth in Science and the Talmud”, *Religions*, 2019, 10(3), 228, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030228>, and idem, “Bossy Matrons and Forced Marriages: Talmudic Confrontationalism and its Philosophical Significance,” *Open Philosophy*, 3, 2020, pp. 335-348.. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. So much so, that civilized pagan disapproval is deemed by the rabbis definitive of the gravest of all sins: *hillul hashem*, the profanation of God’s name. C.f. Fisch, “Gulliver and the Rabbis” §7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On this point see Ishay Rosen-Zvi’s contribution to the present volume, and reference’s there. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See especially, Robert B. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, Part I. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. More on this point in our reply to Jeremy Wanderer. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)