

Moving Beyond the Ideal/Nonideal Debate: A Call for Critical Reconstructive Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

I am not a specialist in higher education; thus, my response will not focus on the larger discussion of the crisis facing public universities per se. Instead, my response focuses on the methodology of this essay. More specifically, I want to explain why this essay is developing an alternative, and in my mind, more productive approach for doing normative philosophy.

With that stated, let me contextualize my argument. A debate has been raging in political philosophy and philosophy of education over the best approach to doing normative philosophy. Often this debate is framed within the Kantian/Rawlsian tradition and revolves around the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory. While this debate has yielded interesting discussions, the framing of this debate is based upon the false assumption that normative philosophy is best done within the Kantian/Rawlsian tradition. Even critics of ideal theory work within this tradition when they *construct* free-standing principles from which to judge social issues *prior to* an immanent analysis of society. However, as critical theorists such as Axel Honneth, Jürgen Habermas, and others have argued, the Kantian/Rawlsian approach is problematic for a number of reasons.¹ One major weakness in framing the debate in this manner, as Axel Honneth explains, “is that it has been decoupled from an analysis of society . . . [and] although theories of justice necessarily formulate normative rules according to which we can assess the moral legitimacy of social orders, today these principles are drawn in isolation from the norms that prevail in given practices and institutions, and are then only applied secondary to social reality.”²

While the author does not directly draw upon critical theory, I want to explain how his methodology parallels the normative reconstructive approach advocated by critical theorists and why this approach is a viable alternative to the dominant Kantian/Rawlsian approach. Before doing so, let me briefly sketch the contours of a reconstructive approach. A *normative reconstructive approach*, as Habermas argues, starts by empirically analyzing the social and historical conditions that give rise to shared universal values. This entails hermeneutically analyzing how participants have come to interpret the legitimacy of social institutions and practices.³ In this regard, a critical conception of justice cannot be understood in isolation from the overarching social values that legitimate social institution and practices.⁴ This parallels what the author calls a *descriptive account*. Second, only after understanding how values and social institutions emerge within a social context can we “rationally reconstruct”⁵ these values and institutions, where rationally reconstructing means explaining why particular social values are universally shared, justifiably grounded, and necessary for the reproduction of that particular society. This parallels what the author calls *normative arguments*.

THE PROMISE OF A RECONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH

Here, I want to focus on two interrelated advantages to a reconstructive approach: (a) it avoids the problem of superimposing values on social institutions, and (b) it historicizes normative shifts and subsequent crises in values. By “superimposing values,” I mean developing normative principles in isolation from the norms already embedded within social institutions, and then secondarily applying those principles onto social institutions and practices. Superimposing values is problematic because one can easily rely upon questionable or ideological assumptions that actually reproduce domination. To avoid applying the wrong principles to a social institution or applying a principle in the wrong manner, an additional step is required, which entails explaining how and why certain social relationships and institutions are necessary for democratic life in the first place. An example of superimposing values is seen in Fullinwider and Lichtenberg’s book *Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics and College Admission*.⁶ In this book, Fullinwider and Lichtenberg take a Rawlsian approach to college admission policies, and argue that the universities should give admission priority to the least advantaged because the university is essential to the larger opportunities available to individuals. The larger details of their argument are irrelevant; the relevant point is the undeveloped normative assumption that education ought to be connected to the labor market. Before establishing normative principles for determining how to justly distribute the positional good of education, we must ask a larger question: When is the relationship between the university and the social division of labor justly structured? It is one thing to assume universities should equalize opportunity within a *just* division of labor; quite another to assume universities should equalize opportunity within a *capitalist* and *unjust* division of labor. The point here is that this Rawlsian approach depends upon a deeper, an underdeveloped, normative argument about the university’s role in the distribution of labor. However, before we can apply a normative principle to the positional good of education, we first must analyze when the university stands in a healthy or unhealthy relation to the labor market, and society in general. Only by reconstructing the normative role of the university within a democratic society can we avoid the problem of superimposing values upon institutions and practices.

I interpret the author as trying to avoid this problem when they are “using the university to reveal the nature of the relationship between these component parts, and then using that diagnosis to make a normative claim about the university.” I interpret this as an alternative to the Kantian/Rawlsian approach as follows: rather than starting with “ideal standards” or “free-standing norms” — such as, the principle of equal opportunity — and then explaining how the university measures up against these external standards, the author starts by analyzing “how people think the state-economy-university-culture constellation can relate (that is, descriptive accounts) and how they should relate to one another in a healthy or unhealthy manner (that is, normative arguments).” This approach parallels the reconstructive approach insofar as it starts by analyzing the social and historical context legitimating the university’s place within a democratic society (the descriptive argument); and only after such an immanent analysis can we analyze when the university stands

in a healthy or unhealthy relationship to the other “constellations” in society (the normative argument).

Second, by historicizing and contextualizing shifts in normative values, the reconstructive approach is better suited to explain when and how social institutions face a legitimation crisis. I take the author as following this line of reasoning when he argues that without contextualizing and historicizing the role of the university within society, we cannot adequately explain when and how the university faces a crisis. For example, higher education and social values legitimating the university, as the author notes, are historically and contextually embedded. Moreover, as the author eloquently explains, the notion of “a crisis” does not occur when institutions fail to meet abstract principles, such as equal opportunity; instead crises mark points where “ideals that gained currency in one constellation lose their value and legitimacy in another.” A crisis, then, occurs when the *concrete* principles legitimating a university begin to lose their legitimacy. As the author correctly notes, the current crisis in the university is a breakdown in the “social compact” between the state, economy, and citizens: for instance, the once semistable assurance that college education would lead to middle-class and/or upper-class employment opportunities is now corroding; consequently there is a weakening of cultural and normative values that once gave the university legitimacy in the public eye.⁷

Without a normatively informed historical and contextual approach, we can easily be asking the university to implement principles that socially cannot be supported and thus exacerbate the crisis. For instance, if “the current state-economy-university-culture constellation renders many of the resources of the university’s past unavailable,” as the author argues, then it also could be the case that the university is unable to realize the principle of equal opportunity — at least in the Rawlsian sense. Moreover, asking the university to realize a principle (such as equal opportunity) can contribute to the crisis by “overloading” the university with normative demands it cannot realize. For example, as Claus Offe and Habermas explain, systems, like the university, can face a legitimation crisis when large constellations in society break down, and, in order to deal with these crises, new demands get placed upon other systems.⁸ The effects are seen as the crisis-driven nature of capitalism creates a breakdown of stable middle class jobs and education is increasingly turned to as the means to “equalize opportunity” within an unjust labor market. However, asking education to equalize opportunity within our current neoliberal context is merely a normative principle applied to the management of crisis. My point is this: we can only determine the “distributive principle” that should be applied to the university after we have rationally reconstructed its place within a democratic society and understood the contextual problems facing it. Without a normative approach similar to what the author is advancing, we may end up only focusing on symptoms — or even creating new symptoms — rather than address root problems.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE ESSAY

So far I have assumed that this paper strongly parallels the reconstructive approach, but there are significant differences between the author’s methodology and a

reconstructive approach. Before concluding, I want to briefly highlight two benefits the reconstructive approach can provide the author.

First, while the author rightfully argues that “the crisis of the university must be attentive to this wider context of historical transformation and the embeddedness of the university in these wider constellations,” he does not *normatively* explain why this methodological approach is necessary. Without such an explanation, the author’s argument for public universities lacks normative grounding because we are unable to determine if the current crisis in the university is a necessary, yet progressive, shift of values or corrosive to democracy. The reconstructive approach, on the other hand, provides the author with these additional arguments by explaining the historical and contextual, yet rational justifications, for the existence of the university, and how and why those values have been fully realized and/or not realized.

Second, a reconstructive approach allows the author to distinguish between different types of crisis. For example, there is a difference between a first-order crisis and a second-order crisis. A *first-order crisis* occurs when the university must rethink fundamental normative purpose(s), and such shifts can be normatively progressive or regressive. For example, as public universities and society secularized, the religious foundations once legitimizing universities no longer held sway, pressuring the university to rethink its normative purpose. This process of secularization, albeit painful, was necessary for the reproduction of a pluralist democratic society. A *second-order crisis*, on the other hand, occurs when the normative purposes of the university cannot be ordered and managed effectively, and is caused by structural contradictions in society that undermine the university’s ability to effectively contribute to the reproduction of a democratic society. For example, as the social compact between the university and the labor market corrodes and public funding for university diminishes, the university is unable to effectively manage its normative purpose in democracy, and thus faces a second-order crisis. A reconstructive approach would allow the author to distinguish between the types of crises because only after engaging in an immanent analysis of the university can we determine what level of crisis is occurring, and if the crisis is progressive or regressive.

1. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (The MIT Press, 1998); Axel Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, 2013.

2. Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 1.

3. See Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (The MIT Press, 1994).

4. Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, xx.

5. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 86.

6. Robert K. Fullinwider and Judith Lichtenberg, *Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics, and College Admissions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

7. See Jeffrey C. Alexander, ed., *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Action and Its Environments* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 175–189; Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 57–80.

8. See Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); Claus Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1984).