

Critique and Analysis

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I must begin with two confessions. First and most importantly, I am ill-equipped for the task of representing conceptual analysis in this response to Mark Frein, and I am well-aware of my inadequacy. Second, I thoroughly enjoyed Frein's paper and much appreciated its generous and open tone, though there is much in it with which I disagree.

In this response, I want to do two things: First to disagree specifically with some of the characterizations of conceptual analysis versus critical theory, then to explore what seem to me to be the roots of the difference between these two approaches and what they may productively offer each other.

I think that Frein is, first and foremost, quite simply and clearly incorrect in his apparent view that analytic philosophy is less concerned with issues of power and justice than is critical theory. And while he at one point does recognize the difference between philosophers and philosophical projects, it is a distinction he fails to maintain in his discussion. While philosophies are concerned with neither justice nor injustice, philosophers may and ought to be so. As I think of the people within this organization who have done and who are doing work on the analytic side of the spectrum, it appears to me obvious that there is deep and pervasive attention to problems of justice, injustice, and power relations among us. What may be more nearly true is that the perceptions of justice and/or injustice are fundamentally different across the analytic-critical divide. That is a different issue, to which I will return below.

In this regard, I think that Frein underestimates the extent to which analytic philosophers are aware of issues of power. The difference, I think, is that critical theorists seem more willing to say that there is only power, which seems neither correct nor particularly helpful. Power might indeed be everywhere; that does not exclude the possibility that restraint and virtue are also part of human experience. While these things might be powerful, it does not follow that they are simply power, or that they are about power.

Second, it is not my impression that analytic philosophers are unaware that they enter an arena of "socio-political" struggles. Where the two schools do differ is the extent to which they are willing to accord good will to those with whom they disagree; analytic philosophers are, I think, less prone to think in terms of "enemies," as Frein reports he has learned to do.

Finally, it seems simply wrong to argue that conceptual analysis is carried on in the belief that we possess our concepts rather than the reverse. As a student of Tom Green's, one of the first things I learned was that we do not just use language to express our ideas about the world; the language that is used around us inevitably shapes the way we think about both the social and physical world. In fact, it seems to me not too strong a statement to say that the power of conceptual analysis is

precisely in what Frein denies it does at all — that is, reveal to us the extent to which the words we use carry hidden power to shape our thinking. Yes, we can and do use words to mean what we want — we can at times possess our concepts. But the language and social games that go on around us pre-exist our participation. We are shaped by them long before we begin to play them. This is an insight that is neither denied by analytic philosophy, nor new to critique. The impersonal way in which power shapes the operation of a systemic enterprise is described with beautiful clarity by Green.¹ Similarly, if one wants to understand the operation of discipline as a force in society one could do far worse than read Durkheim,² who is followed, though with far less apparent understanding of the human condition, by Foucault.³

What Frein describes as toothlessness, as banality, as conservatism, is more, I think, a hesitancy to be certain that a particular position or belief is the correct one to be acted upon. In this respect, I think it does make sense to see a certain conservatism in analytic philosophy, though not in a political sense. For the hesitancy is rooted in the Aristotelian recognition that this is indeed the real world, and that we should hesitate before attempting to radically change something that we do not fully understand and that we might indeed make much worse. When looking at social realities, analytic philosophers may be a bit more constrained than their critical colleagues because of their understanding that no matter how bad things are, ill-considered action might make them worse. And this is where I think that the deep differences between critical and analytic philosophy are clear — in the difference between a Platonic (critical) and Aristotelian (analytic) view of the world and the purpose of philosophy.

I want to suggest that postmodern critical philosophers, like Plato in *The Republic* (and Socrates more generally), are willing to take action based on mental images of the way the world ought to be rather than observation of the way things are. Confronted with an injustice, critically oriented philosophers are indeed more ready than their analytic colleagues to head for the barricades.

This has, I think, to do with the very nature of analysis. Approaching the world analytically, one might become convinced that it is far easier to recognize injustice than to correct it. On any number of public policy issues this seems true. No one dissents from the proposition that there has been a history of systematic racism in the United States; the remedy does not present itself directly from that fact, even if one agrees that remedy is necessary. Similarly, recognition of the theft of Native American lands and the genocide that accompanied it does not lead directly to a remedy. It is news to no one that power differentials affect world-views and their constructions, but the solutions do not fall out of that fact.

While critical philosophers do claim a preoccupation with justice, I would rather say that their project is the destruction of the present system of injustices, with too little thought to what may follow. How else does one account for Freire's appeals to Maoism as an ideal of a democratic society,⁴ despite the obvious abuses of power that followed in his wake? One does not doubt Freire's commitment to the overthrow of injustice, but one can seriously question the wisdom of his direction. Similarly, Foucault approvingly describes the summary execution by mob violence as "people's

justice.”⁵ One need not call into question his commitment in order to feel that a certain hesitancy — toothless conservatism, if you will — would not have been amiss.

What exactly is a just way to arrange society so that finite goods are divided among infinite desires, or at least desires that exceed the existence of goods? What is the proper balance, for example, between the conflicting social goods of individual liberty and social equality. Granted that these are both worth having, and noticing that they are in conflict, at least insofar as either one is maximized, then the policy question is how to best balance them, and how to arrive at an arrangement that balances them to people’s satisfaction. Further, analysis will suggest that there is no permanent answer to the question. Each generation (and groups within each generation) will note the extent to which injustice is perpetrated by the failure to allow a full measure of one or the other of these social goods. Injustice will, on this analysis, always be with us, though careful and thoughtful — indeed, I want to say, rational — action can serve to reduce it.

Frein seems to suggest that what analysis and critique have to offer each other is the opportunity to learn from one another — that analytics should be more passionate and less reticent to enter the political-power realities of social life, and that critics will be more effective in argument if they learn to wield some of the logical force of analysis. I want to make a somewhat different suggestion.

It seems to me that what each group has to offer to the other is first of all respect for the intentions and good will of the other, so that we can listen. There is much to consider in the work of, for example, Foucault. As wrong as I think he is on so many things, I think he is wrong in ways that point to a deeper understanding of the social world. I think that what criticism has to offer to analysis is just that: criticism. I see no need, frankly, for critics to be more analytic, or vice versa. Ancient Israel needed both policy makers and prophets — the one to make policy, the other to point out its inevitable shortcomings. Similarly, I take the position, in disagreement with Frein, that philosophy needs both analysis and critique: analysis to seek an understanding of the way things are, critique to point out the way things could be, even if analysis suggests that things can not really be that way. What each has to offer to the other, I suspect, is to be nothing other than what it is.

1. Thomas F. Green, *Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1980).

2. Emile Durkheim, *On Moral Education* (1961; reprint, New York: The Free Press, 1973).

3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 82-83.

5. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon; trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mephan, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 28-ff.