A characteristic of theorists of the past cultural era was wanting to find the a-priori where there wasn’t one.

you cannot lead people to the good; you can only lead them to some place or other.

WITTGENSTEIN

The phrase “normative inquiry,” as typically employed in the social and human sciences, might lead someone to wonder whether it referred to inquiry into expressions of normativity or whether it involved inquiry with a normative purpose. These senses are not easily disentangled, but what is often categorized as normative theory and inquiry is the attempt by theorists such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas to seek general principles of rule-based reasoning, or what Linda Zerilli refers to in her chapter as “cognitive judgment,” whether of a Kantian or empiricist variety, that surpass the specific contexts and particularities of moral and political practice.¹ The basic spirit of this genre in contemporary analytical philosophy is in many ways exemplified in the philosopher Derek Parfit’s claim that while much of moral philosophy has tended, in one way or another, to slide off into “nihilism,” he had succeeded in arriving at “the supreme moral principle” and a universal answer to the problem of ethical judgment.² His work captures well the two basic dimensions of this kind of enterprise – the fear of epistemic chaos in ethical matters and the presumption that philosophy holds both the epistemic and practical answer to the problem of moral judgment. He claimed that he had found “true answers” to questions about “what matters” morally and what we should morally do, which are as

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defensible as the rules of logic and mathematics. Such an enterprise is quite far removed from Wittgenstein’s vision of philosophy. For Wittgenstein, philosophy was inherently a form of normative inquiry in that its subject matter consisted of language-games and forms of life, which were both the source and repository of normativity. In that respect, all the social and human sciences are necessarily engaged in normative inquiry. What is intensely alien to Wittgenstein’s philosophy is the idea of philosophy as either an authoritative supplier of values or arbiter of conflicts between values.

A basic premise of the following discussion is that a significant dimension of the change of direction in Wittgenstein’s work after 1930 was a turn to a vision of philosophy as a form of social inquiry and that this image of philosophy has significant implications for the concerns and practices of social theorists and social scientists. His overriding goal was to understand and interpret the phenomena under investigation, but although, as Nigel Pleasants has emphasized, Wittgenstein did not provide grounds for many of the aspirations of normative theory, there was an important therapeutic dimension to his work. In addition to pointing to confusions and other infelicities that might attend certain language-games, he did not hesitate to engage critically the practice of philosophy as well as practices such as mathematics, psychology, and anthropology and even what he perceived as the pathologies of modern culture. When he said that “philosophy leaves everything as it is,” he did not mean either that philosophy would be left as it was or that the subject matter of philosophy would, or should be, left as it was, but he did mean that philosophy was not, in either an epistemic or practical sense, in any special position to legislate values and specify the criteria of moral judgment. He was concerned with what he referred to as the inherent danger of “dogmatism,” which was characteristic of metaphysics and other aspects of traditional philosophy and which arose from confusing the means of representation with what was represented and projecting onto the subject matter the philosopher’s, or, for example, the anthropologist’s, Weltbild and criteria of judgment. He said that, as either philosophers or ethnologists, “our only task is to be just” and “not to


6 Ibid., §50, §131.