

Recognition and Criticism in the Anthropocene

1 *Criticism in the Anthropocene*

Among the pressing crises of the age, contributing to many others, is environmental crisis. It seems the prognosis darkens weekly. We cook the planet in carbon dioxide, the seas keep rising, the droughts worsen each year, and fires engulf Los Angeles, Australia, and the Amazon. And climate change is just one of many related problems. A recent report from the UN's Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services estimates that one million species (many that can experience pain, some that can experience fear, affection, and loss) are at risk of extinction. Even if biodiversity loss did not affect humans, this would still be a travesty.

What does critical theory have to say about environmental crisis? Of late, conspicuously little. Humanity's domination of the rest of nature receives scant attention in the work of influential critical theorists,¹ and this, despite humanity's domination of the non-human world being a central concern of their predecessors. I am thinking, of course, of

¹ A notable recent exception is Nancy Fraser's and Rahel Jaeggi's work on capitalism. See, for example: Fraser (2014) and Fraser and Jaeggi (2018).

Adorno and Horkheimer, whose critique of instrumental reason wove together criticism of domination among humans and criticism of humans' domination of animals and the environment more generally.

So, why the silence from critical theory today? Is it just an important but easily-remedied oversight—do critical theorists just need to start writing about environmental crisis again—or, more worryingly, does critical theory lack the tools to criticize humanity's domination of nonhumans? In what follows I argue the latter—contemporary critical theory lacks normative foundations for, broadly speaking, criticism of humans' relations with the nonhuman world. I focus primarily on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition—which does not, as it stands, provide the foundations for this criticism.

To be clear, critical theory's environmental problems are not distinctive to the theory of recognition. By replacing production (as in Marx) with communication as the primary vehicle of social reproduction and in turn by taking communication as the key phenomenon for social-theoretical analysis, Habermas's social theory already severs the link between human society and the nonhuman world that supports it. And the related idea of communicative reason, which provides the foundations for social critique that early critical theory notably lacks,² is correspondingly ill-equipped for criticism of humanity's domination of nonhumans—nonhuman beings who cannot use language cannot participate in practical discourse, and Habermas's second-order criticism of systemically distorted communication has nothing to say about nonhumans' plights. Moreover, the distinction Habermas relies on between ethics and morality is made in such a way that no universal claims may be made about value (importantly for our purposes, about nonhumans' value); the axial is always associated with the culturally particular in Habermasian discourse theory. Habermas's unsatisfactory response to worries about discourse morality's anthropocentrism in *Justification and Application* only serves to illustrate some of these problems.³

² As Martin Jay tells it in *Reason after Its Eclipse* (2016), the 'first generation's' critique of instrumental reason levelled the old foundations without leaving an alternative.

³ Habermas (1993).

Contemporary critical theory's difficulty with environmental criticism likely has deep roots. More, more careful excavation of these roots is necessary, but is beyond the scope of this paper. So, I focus here on Honneth's recognition theory, which is the most influential alternative to Habermas's theory of communicative reason regarding the foundations of critical social theory. I argue that recognition theory does not, as it stands, provide foundations for criticism of humanity's domination of nonhumans or social actors' domination of what is external to society. It is, therefore, incomplete.

My argument is as follows. In *Disrespect* ("Pathologies of the Social"), Honneth argues that social philosophy's aim is to diagnose society's pathologies, which are defined as obstacles to human self-realization that have arisen through social development. Intersubjective recognition is, according to Honneth, the key to self-realization—thus social pathology is given a recognition-theoretic gloss in Honneth's social philosophy, with intersubjective recognition treated as the yardstick for social health. But because of this, Honneth cannot fully account for the ways that society might be pathological not just internally, but also in how it relates to, and in its treatment of, what is or is viewed as external to it.

Put differently (to introduce some jargon I will be using from here on out), Honneth's recognition theory seems to provide foundations only for *intrasocial* criticism—criticism of relations among social actors—but not of *extrasocial* criticism—criticism of how society relates to the rest of the world. Recognition theory seems to have nothing to say about humanity's domination of nonhumans, or about social struggles on their behalf.

In the next section, I summarize Honneth's conception of social philosophy, which he sets out in "Pathologies of the Social," and then show that the intrasocial/extrasocial distinction mentioned above runs through the history of social philosophy, and that this is apparent although not explicit in Honneth's conception. I also note that Honneth's conception of social philosophy seems to be anthropocentric, in that it seems to accord moral standing or worth only to humans.

In section 3, I discuss Horkheimer's and Adorno's (primarily Horkheimer's) critique of instrumental reason as an example of criticism that is anthropocentric but also extrasocial (criticism can be both anthropocentric yet extrasocial). I ultimately avoid taking a position on anthropocentrism here, letting the reader decide whether or to what extent it is an issue. But I also note that, insofar as the critique of instrumental reason contains fairly pointed *criticism* of anthropocentrism, the critique of instrumental reason is in tension with itself.⁴ Nevertheless, the possibility of criticism that is both extrasocial and anthropocentric is left open—it is just extrasocial criticism of anthropocentrism itself that leads to these difficulties.

In section 4, I summarize Honneth's recognition theory. In section 5, I argue that it does not put extrasocial criticism on foundations. In taking intersubjective recognition as the yardstick for social health, it says nothing about how humans relate to the nonhuman environment, or social actors relate to what is or is considered external to society. I then demonstrate why this is a problem.

To conclude in section 6, I try to think with Honneth about how his theory of recognition can be modified to provide foundations for extrasocial criticism. I note three plausible lines of thinking. One, which does not require structural changes to the theory, involves demonstrating how destroying or otherwise mistreating what other people or groups value can be a form of disrespect that denigrates their way of life. Doing so shows that certain environmental movements (I am thinking in particular of indigenous movements) are in fact recognition struggles. Another line of thinking involves developing the other side of the recognition coin further than it is developed in Honneth's theory, by exploring the ways that self-realization might involve recognizing others (relevantly, nonhumans). I acknowledge that establishing this fully is beyond the scope of this paper, nevertheless I try to show that it is at least plausible, and is a promising direction for further inquiry for theorists of recognition.

⁴ Obviously, Horkheimer and Adorno did not have the term 'anthropocentrism.' But it seems they basically had the concept, at least as I am using it here.

A critical theory for the Anthropocene needs normative foundations that can explain what is wrong with how humans relate to nonhumans, who, lacking language, are unable to understand their experiences as disrespectful or to say so if they did. But we cannot simply redraw the boundaries of society to include nonhumans. Thus, critical theory needs normative foundations for both intrasocial criticism of relations among social actors and an extrasocial criticism of society's relation to the nonsocial.

2 *Social Philosophy and Extrasocial Criticism*

In "Pathologies of the Social" Honneth traces the development of the philosophy of society, arguing that its historical aim has been to diagnose pathologies—structural obstacles to human self-realization—that have arisen through social development.

Diagnosing a society's pathological elements requires us to have a conception of social health or normality against which to diagnose those pathological elements.⁵ Such an account is hard to come by—this, Honneth notes, is made clear the failure of the social sciences to "fix the functional requirements of societies... through external observation." (D 35) Because what counts as healthy for a society depends on that society's member's goals, it seems that diagnosing a particular society's pathologies requires the diagnostician to appeal to the goals or values of the members of that society. We might, Honneth notes, "limit ourselves to an empirical description of what a given culture regards as a disorder," but doing so is, he continues, "insufficient for social philosophy's aims." (D 35) So (this being the paper's central thesis),

the latter has taken a different path from the very beginning—one towards formal ethics. A paradigm of social normality must... consist in culturally independent conditions that allow a society's members to experience undistorted self-realization. (D 35)

⁵ It is a little worrying that Honneth identifies lack of pathologies with social normality, because pathologies have likely been the social norm, and lack of pathology an exception. The point may be wholly terminological—it seems Honneth could easily replace "normality" with "health."

In what sense does Honneth mean ‘formal’? As he puts it later, “this ethical background condition is formal in the sense that it only normatively emphasizes the social preconditions of human self-realization,” rather than “the goals served by these conditions,” (D 36) thus pathologies are defined neutrally regarding the values of particular societies.

Although taking this approach addresses the issue of contingent understandings of a society’s aims by framing pathology in formal terms, it still requires that we identify universal (i.e., culturally independent) conditions for human self-realization. Of course, there is considerable disagreement about whether such conditions exist, and if they do, what exactly those conditions are. Among the latter, some positions are more individualist and others more collectivist. But demonstrating that such conditions exist in the first place is potentially fraught—historically, many accounts of these conditions were discredited later on for ultimately expressing (in an underhanded way) culturally-particular values, in much the same way that criticism based on some substantive ethical position does. Along these lines, the central challenge for the philosophy of society today is, Honneth argues, to convincingly justify its claim that certain social conditions are universally necessary for self-realization. (D 40)

Honneth discusses three promising contemporary strategies for justifying the types of claims (regarding the necessary conditions for self-realization) on which the philosophy of society relies. One is Habermas’s intersubjective proceduralism (as he articulates it in *Justification and Application*) about ethical questions. But going that route involves giving up the diagnosis of pathologies to social subjects themselves, which Honneth does not find appealing. Another strategy follows a younger Habermas (circa *Theory of Communicative Action*), but also Martha Nussbaum and Charles Taylor, in pursuing an extremely thin philosophical anthropology (“one which reconstructs but a few elementary conditions of human life” (D 42)), against which to diagnose pathologies. And the final strategy, which Honneth also attributes to Taylor, is to be a little more comfortable with the historical contingency of our views, and to adopt a more interpretive approach to ethical reflection; that involves assessing pathologies based on the historically and culturally particular values that a

hermeneutical approach to ethical reflection reveals. Honneth notes that such an approach squares nicely with Foucault's—but interestingly enough, the late Rawls also jumps to mind here.⁶ Adopting this final approach, though, means giving up social philosophy's claim to context-transcending diagnosis of pathologies, which is also unappealing. So Honneth thinks the second strategy is best. He does not mention his own work, but it is clear enough that his own theory of recognition (which I discuss in detail below) employs the second strategy.

Although Honneth does not explicitly distinguish between intrasocial and extrasocial criticism in “Pathologies of the Social” the distinction is apparent in his history of the discipline. In discussing past accounts of the conditions required for human self-realization, for example, he writes that “the question... becomes crucial whether it is a communitarian form of ethical life, a distance-creating public sphere, non-alienated labor or a mimetic interaction with nature that enables individuals to lead a well-lived life.” (D 37) Clearly, the former two are intrasocial conditions, whereas the latter two are extrasocial.

We have to be careful here to separate out extrasocial conditions for self-realization from extrasocial criticism (likewise with intrasocial). A historical example helps to illustrate the difference. Marx, Honneth notes, takes non-alienated labor as the condition for human self-realization. And non-alienated labor is an extrasocial condition. But, Marx thinks, the cause of alienated labor (i.e., the obstacle to human self-realization—the social pathology in question) is the division of labor, which is, broadly, an intrasocial condition. So Marx's *criticism* is *intrasocial* despite the fact he thinks that *extrasocial conditions* are necessary for self-realization. In this effect, Arendt is of the opposite mind to Marx. Action in the public sphere, which is free of the deterministic influence of biological needs, is, Arendt argues, the necessary condition for human self-realization; and a pseudo-politics devoted only to fulfilling people's biological needs, which precludes this action, is the obstacle to human self-

⁶ Certainly, Rawls does not adopt a *hermeneutical* approach to his reflections on our values—but if we treat epistemology as value-based in the same way that ethics is, Rawls has a strong claim that he has adopted the ahistorical epistemic values of his place and time (twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy) in a fuller sense than Taylor has.

realization. In other words, then—the conditions required for self-realization are intrasocial for Arendt, but extrasocial conditions are the obstacle to human self-realization.⁷

Another point, before moving on. In Honneth's telling of its history, the philosophy of society—insofar as its only aim is to diagnose pathologies, which are defined as obstacles to human self-realization—is basically anthropocentric. Human self-realization is treated as the only question of ethical significance; a society in which the conditions for self-realization are met (or, free of obstacles to self-realization) is not pathological even if its reproduction involves the destruction of ecosystems and the abuse of nonhuman animals; along these lines, as long as it is not an obstacle to human self-realization, factory farming is not worthy of criticism. As noted above, I do not take a position on anthropocentrism here—doing so would take me well beyond the scope of this paper. But I will admit: I find this implication disquieting.

Nevertheless, there is the possibility of criticism that is both extrasocial and anthropocentric—which, in other words, has something to say regarding humans' relations to the nonhuman world despite remaining in an anthropocentric key. Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason is one influential example of this kind of criticism.

3 *The Critique of Instrumental Reason: Anthropocentric but Extrasocial*

Humans' domination of nonhumans is frequently the object of early critical theory, in particular Horkheimer's and Adorno's critique of instrumental reason. Because of the way that it links humans' domination of (and more broadly, attitudes towards) nonhumans to humans' domination of other humans and self-repression, though, the critique of instrumental reason frequently gives the impression that humans' domination of nonhumans is the object of criticism, when it is, only on the basis that humans' domination of nonhumans

⁷ I am overstating this a little in the case of Arendt, because clearly Arendt's criticisms are not exclusively extrasocial. In general, I am setting aside a bit of nuance in trying to apply these analytical categories neatly to the history of social philosophy. Nevertheless, I think they are illuminating.

is ultimately detrimental to humans. This is hardly surprising—after all, in “Traditional and Critical Theory,” Horkheimer argues that critical theory’s aim is human emancipation. So, despite focusing on humans’ domination of nonhumans, the critique of instrumental reason was anthropocentric—it was extrasocial but anthropocentric. Or so I argue in what follows. I draw primarily from Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason* (especially from chapter 3, “Revolt of Nature”), but it is worth noting that many similar points are made in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, albeit differently.⁸

A clarificatory point first. I am interested in accounts of critical theory’s normative foundations here; the critique of instrumental reason is no such account. It is first-order social critique—what needs the foundations, not what provides or identifies the foundations. Plus, the widely recognized issue with the critique of instrumental reason is that it lacks foundations, even corrodes its possible foundations.⁹ So to be clear, I discuss the critique of instrumental reason as an example of a type of criticism (extrasocial) that Honneth’s account of critical theory’s foundations precludes, not as the proposed alternative to Honneth’s. Relatedly, my argument is not for dusting off the critique of instrumental reason—the critique of instrumental reason does not exhaust extrasocial criticism, and my concern is with the foundations of extrasocial criticism broadly.

In “Revolt of Nature,” Horkheimer links humans’ domination of nonhumans to self-repression by humans and to domination of some humans by others. Early on he writes:

... the more all nature is looked upon as “quite a mess of miscellaneous stuff,” ... as mere objects in relation to human subjects, the more is the... subject emptied of any content, until it finally becomes a mere name with nothing to denominate. The total transformation of each and every realm of being into a field of means leads to the liquidation of the subject who is supposed to use them ... The human being, in the process of his emancipation, shares the fate of the rest of his world. Domination of nature involves domination of man. Each subject not only has to take part in the

⁸ Importantly, Adorno’s later work (I am thinking in particular of *Negative Dialectics*) is decidedly less anthropocentric than Horkheimer’s work and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I do not have space to treat it here.

⁹ See: Jay, M (2016), *Reason after Its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory*.

subjection of external nature, human and nonhuman, but in order to do so must subjugate nature in himself ... (ER 66)

Instrumental reason's hegemony means that people see nothing as inherently valuable.¹⁰ Only means are dealt with rationally, never ends.¹¹ Widespread inarticulateness about ends manifests in a society that serves nothing but a blind survival urge, which seeks to escape nature at all costs (and at nonhumans' expense). But all the methods, technologies, etc., that humans create to escape nature become as powerful as nature itself, and individuals must adapt further to these, just as individuals adapted to nature.¹² A society that is inarticulate about its ends dominates nature with no motive other than the desire to escape it, such that it does not really transcend nature but rather just represses it. Neither humans' inner nature, nor external (or, nonhuman) nature, are spared. And the repression of humans' inner nature leads eventually to revolts of nature, which are now, Horkheimer argues, manipulated to serve the aims of totalitarian governments, by demagogues who give the appearance of acting natural or authentic, usually by subverting the society's previously accepted norms.

Horkheimer's criticisms in "Revolt of Nature" are often extrasocial—of how society relates to what is external to it, or humans relate to nonhumans. But they are also basically anthropocentric, insofar as these relations are taken as worthy of criticism largely the basis

¹⁰ It is worth noting that humanity's domination of nature—at least in Horkheimer's work—is not discussed in strictly axial terms. At issue is less that humans no longer see nature as inherently valuable, and more that humans no longer see nature as inherently meaningful. Sometimes, admittedly, Horkheimer is less than clear, employing one or the other or both terms to describe what has been lost. But in general, it is nature's inherent meaning, not inherent value, that is missing from humans' outlook and that relates to humans' domination of each other and themselves. In what follows, I will mostly discuss nature's inherent value, not meaning. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the alternative—and that a disenchanted outlook entails a loss of meaning as much as (if not more than) a loss of value.

¹¹ As Horkheimer puts it, "What is usually indicated as a goal—the happiness of the individual, health, and wealth—gains its significance exclusively from its functional potentiality... Therefore self-renunciation of the individual in industrialist society has no goal transcending industrialist society. Such abnegation brings about rationality with reference to means and irrationality with reference to human existence." (ER 66)

¹² "Economic and social forces," Horkheimer writes, "take on the character of blind natural powers that man, in order to preserve himself, must dominate by adjusting himself to them." (ER 68)

that humans will share the fate of nonhumans. Our abuse of external nature is bad only because it is bad for us. At least, that is the sense that Horkheimer leaves the reader by incessantly linking the fate of humans to the fate of nonhumans. And not even halfway through “Revolt of Nature,” Horkheimer stops talking about the fate of nonhumans almost entirely, in favor of discussion of humans’ domination of other humans, of their inner nature, and of how this relates to totalitarianism. And although that analysis remains characteristically sensitive, thought-provoking, and relevant—it is impossible to miss many (too many) contemporary politicians, too many hate-drunk supporters at noxious political rallies, in Horkheimer’s depiction of the autocrat in front of a crowd of supporters—the strength of his analysis to this effect does not absolve it.

Still without taking a position on anthropocentrism itself, it is worth noting how the critique of instrumental reason being anthropocentric might undermine it. As I define it above, something is anthropocentric if it accords value or moral standing only to humans. By that definition, it is hardly a stretch to say the critique of instrumental reason contained a critique of anthropocentrism. In certain places, humans’ treatment of nonhumans (importantly, as mere means) is the object of sharp criticism—but mostly (so I hope I have demonstrated) on the basis that it is bad for humans. And there is, decidedly, a tension here, because taking humans’ treatment of nonhumans as worth criticism largely on the basis that humans will share in the fate of nonhumans is hardly to escape the ideas that make the mistreatment of nonhumans appear unproblematic in the first place.¹³ So when Horkheimer is critical of the domination of nonhumans on the basis that “the human being, in the process of his emancipation, shares the fate of the rest of his world” (*ER* 66), he is (on, admittedly, the harsher of the possible readings) just reproducing the type of thinking he is criticizing. If,

¹³ Ceasing to treat nonhumans as mere means or expressing concern for their suffering but only on the basis that doing so is better for humans is at best insincere, and likely worse—it isn’t actually to cease treating nonhumans as mere means or to express concern for their suffering. If I am kind to another person only because being kind to her is better for me, I still treat her as a means. I fail to treat another person as an end if I am only “treating her as an end” because “treating her as an end” is good for me—that’s just not what it is to treat someone as an end.

along these lines, the critique of instrumental reason was frequently anthropocentric (if, in other words, I am correct), that seems to be a serious problem. It is also a difficulty that any philosopher engaged in extrasocial criticism must be aware of.¹⁴

Before moving on there are a couple of objections to address. One is that certain passages trouble my reading—namely, those passages in which humans’ domination of nonhumans is not immediately related to humans’ domination of humans (others and themselves) in a way that suggests that what is really at issue is the latter. But such passages are fewer and farther between than passages that suggest otherwise. Moreover, to stress again an important point, critical theory ultimately aims at human liberation. If human liberation requires animal liberation, so much better for the animals—but human liberation remains what is at issue.

But a more difficult challenge is worth mentioning. It is that I cannot defend the distinctions I make (between intrasocial and extrasocial and anthropocentric and not anthropocentric) because Horkheimer, Adorno, et al., bristled against distinctions like these, and hoped for their work to contribute to a reconciliation with nature—so distinctions like these no longer fly, and it is basically regressive to draw them. I have three replies to this worry. First, it is just not clear why reconciliation with nature would entail the distinctions

¹⁴ I think this way of thinking begins to point us to deep challenge for critical theory, especially critical theory in Horkheimer’s key—that it frequently evaluates ways of thinking in terms of their negative effects, usually on humans or society. If Honneth is correct about early critical theory—that like most of social philosophy since Rousseau it aims to diagnose pathologies in society—then this must be the case, insofar the critique of instrumental reasoning (including Adorno’s critique of conceptualization in *Negative Dialectics*, etc.) is a critique of a particular way of thinking or its hegemony. So it seems as if critical theory itself, insofar as it continues to involve critique of particular ways of thinking on the basis of their damaging effects on humans (of course, it does not always—for Habermas, the critique, at least in the *Theory of Communicative Action*, is frequently a critique of technology, of the media through which ideas are transmitted, “systematically distorted communication,” etc., even if it also invokes the older specter of instrumental reason), is always in danger of accidentally affirming, in its final criteria of evaluation, the very ideas that it criticizes. I do not believe Honneth’s recognition theory does this, although admittedly my proposed solutions to it might, and so share the flaw I have pointed out in the critique of instrumental reason.

disappearing—for Adorno, at least, reconciliation did not mean eradicating difference. Second, that the work I am discussing contributes to reconciliation is, it seems, precisely what my reading calls into question. (Along these lines, I think the distinctions can be sustained.) And third, even if these distinctions cannot be sustained, what is ultimately at issue is Honneth's theory of recognition, which in that case just misses an important part of a larger whole that subsumes both intrasocial and extrasocial criticism.

4 *Recognition Theory*

I argued in section 2 that Honneth's "Pathologies of the Social" makes clear (if not explicit) a distinction which runs through the history of social philosophy, between intrasocial and extrasocial criticism, and also outlines a conception of social philosophy on which the discipline is decidedly anthropocentric. In section 3 I noted that social criticism can be both anthropocentric and extrasocial—as the critique of instrumental reason frequently was. It is, along these lines, possible to diagnose pathologies that have to do with the way that social actors relate to what is external to society (that are, in a word, extrasocial). Social actors' extrasocial relations are pathological if they preclude or otherwise create obstacles to self-realization either for themselves or for other social actors.

In what follows, I summarize Honneth's theory of recognition, before arguing (in the next section) that Honneth's recognition-theoretic account of the normative foundations of critical social theory precludes, or fails to provide foundations for, extrasocial criticism; that extrasocial criticism is necessary for critical theory; and thus, that Honneth's theory of recognition gives an incomplete account of critical theory's normative foundations.

Honneth's theory of recognition picks up where "Pathologies of the Social" leaves off. As noted above, Honneth thinks that a thin philosophical anthropology is the best route for justifying the types of claims that the philosophy of society must make about context-transcending conditions for human self-realization. His theory of recognition is developed along these lines.

Honneth follows the young Hegel (by way of Mead) in arguing that certain forms of recognition are necessary for practical identity formation—or, to put it in the broader terms of his conception of social philosophy, for human self-realization. Although Hegel deserves credit for this basic thought, Mead advances it further, and in a materialist key, without all of the metaphysical deadweight of Hegel's account. And it is to Mead that Honneth turns in systematizing Hegel's theory of recognition. As he puts it,

the theoretical resources found in Mead's social psychology made it possible to give Hegel's theory of a 'struggle for recognition' a 'materialist' reformulation. What re-emerged in Mead, in the altered form of an empirical hypothesis, was not only the general premise of the early Hegel—that practical identity-formation presupposes intersubjective recognition—but also postmetaphysical, naturalistic equivalents for the conceptual distinctions among various stages of recognition and even the wide-reaching assertion of a struggle mediating between these stages. Thus, by drawing on Mead's social psychology, it becomes possible to take the idea that the young Hegel outlined in his Jena writings with such brilliant rudimentariness and make it the guiding thread of a social theory with normative content. The intention of this is to explain processes of social change by referring to the normative demands that are, structurally speaking, internal to the relationship of mutual recognition. (86)

Mead's account (which is familiar not just from Honneth's but also from Habermas's work—I am thinking of papers like "Individuation through Socialization") deals initially with a problem regarding how individual subjects can attain self-knowledge, considering that reflecting on oneself seems to always involve making oneself the object of one's reflection or thought—such that what is learned about is not exactly the self, or the whole self, because the self is also what is doing the reflecting, not just what is being reflected on.¹⁵ Along these lines, the reflecting self seems always to elude the reflecting self. To capture this thought, Mead distinguishes between the spontaneously acting subject, the 'I,' from the objectified 'me' that results from reflection. It is only through interacting with others, Mead argues, that we come to know our 'I,' the spontaneously acting subject, which eludes itself (or eludes us) in self-reflection.

¹⁵ This, Honneth notes, was a response to a problem for psychology at that time, regarding how access can be gained to the psychical in the first place.

Mead's account also has a practical (rather than just epistemic) edge. Developing a practical relation-to-self—beyond an epistemic self-relation (to borrow Honneth's and Habermas's terminology), which is a necessary but insufficient precondition for the former— involves, Mead thinks, internalizing expectations that others (and our communities more generally) have of our behavior, and then deciding whether to comply with these. On the practical front, it is the 'me' that results from this internalization of others' behavioral expectations (from, we might say, practical socialization), whereas the 'I' is what might bristle against these expectations. If 'I' cannot bear to comply with others' expectations, 'I' might imagine another community, with different expectations—an alternative picture of society, basically. 'I' might also challenge the moral-ethical expectations of my community. Both drive moral progress.

Honneth conceives this process in recognition-theoretic terms, and the process by which the 'I' challenges others' expectations as a struggle for recognition. As he puts it, discussing how children form a practical relation-to-self, "to the extent that growing children recognize their interaction partners by way of an internalization of their normative attitudes, they can know themselves to be members of their social context of cooperation." (SR 74) And to the degree that individuals internalize norms that protect or benefit them, they feel themselves recognized as members of their community (SR 75). When they internalize norms that do not, they do not feel themselves recognized—and, in some cases, will struggle for recognition. Social movements, on this account, are struggles for recognition.

Honneth defends and systematizes Mead's ideas further than Mead does, frequently employing contemporary empirical evidence. He argues this evidence largely supports Hegel's familiar distinctions between three forms of recognition—love, rights, and solidarity. In more intimate spheres, with family and friends, recognition takes the form of love. In society more broadly, legally-protected rights institutionalize a less affective form of recognition—of, roughly speaking, the freedom or autonomy, and the corresponding moral agency, of others. And finally, in value-based communities, recognition takes the form of solidarity, a kind of mutual esteem that allows individuals, Honneth writes, "to relate positively to their... traits

and abilities.” (SR 109) Importantly, solidarity can only occur in communities in which values are shared commonly, because for people to esteem others in the necessary sense requires them to see others as contributing to the realization of aims or goals they too see as valuable.¹⁶

In Honneth’s parlance, to be denied recognition is to be disrespected. As he puts it in *The Struggle for Recognition*,

what the term ‘disrespect’ ... refers to is the specific vulnerability of humans resulting from the internal interdependence of individualization and recognition, which both Hegel and Mead helped to illuminate. Because the normative self-image of each and every individual human being... is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others, the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse. (SR 116)

Honneth discusses three forms of disrespect—violations of the body, denial of rights, and the denigration of ways of life—which, he argues, correlate to the forms of recognition above (respectively), in that they undermine the aspects of the practical relation-to-self these forms of recognition cultivate. Violations of the body, for example, undermine the basic self-confidence that love cultivates.

It strikes me that we probably need to distinguish more carefully among situations in which recognition does not occur, such that a person’s practical relation-to-self never emerges, situations in which recognition occurs but in the wrong way, such that a person’s relation-to-self is ill-formed in some way, and situations in which something is done to a person such that a person’s (already formed?) relation-to-self is undermined. Obviously, actual situations might involve, respectively, recognition failure, misrecognition, and/or disrespect, to varying degrees. And it seems that disrespect *evinces* recognition failure or misrecognition. But I think all three are importantly distinct. Disrespect undermines the relations-to-self that

¹⁶ Honneth describes the difference between the form of recognition expressed in legally granted rights and that expressed in relations of solidarity thus: “Whereas modern law represents a medium of recognition that expresses the universal features of human subjects, ... [solidarity] demands a social medium that must be able to express the characteristic differences among human subjects in a universal and ... intersubjectively obligatory way.” (SR 109)

recognition cultivates, in part because it evinces recognition failure or misrecognition. But disrespect goes beyond recognition failures and misrecognition. Withholding love is not an act of violence (violence goes beyond withholding love); love cultivates one aspect of the practical relation-to-self, while violence negates that same aspect. But love can simply be withheld.¹⁷

Honneth's theory of recognition constitutes a formal ethics, which identifies the conditions required for human self-realization vis-à-vis a thin philosophical anthropology—just as described in “Pathologies of the Social.” As he puts it in *The Struggle for Recognition*,

If... Hegel's conception of the 'struggle for recognition'—as corrected by Mead's social psychology—is to be made the guiding thread of a critical social theory, then this requires, finally, a philosophical justification for its underlying normative principle. This is to be attempted, in the final chapter, by way of a formal conception of ethical life, in which intersubjective conditions for personal integrity will be interpreted, taken together, as presuppositions for individual self-realization. (SR 124)

A society is taken as healthy or non-pathological if the forms of recognition discussed above are present and the forms of disrespect discussed above are not. And experiences of disrespect—which motivate social movements—are the social experiences to which the social criticism of critical theorists is linked. Along these lines, Honneth's theory of recognition paves the way for immanent criticism of society—a criticism that takes its bearing from something immanent in a society itself. Moreover, it has explanatory power—seeing social movements as struggles for recognition explains why those social movements occur.

¹⁷ Honneth writes that: “Using the resources of an empirically grounded phenomenology, we have been able to show that Hegel's and Mead's tripartite distinction among forms of recognition did not entirely miss its mark in social reality. Indeed, it turned out to be thoroughly capable of fruitfully disclosing the moral infrastructure of interactions. As a result, it was also possible... to map these various patterns of recognition onto different types of practical relations-to-self, that is, onto ways of relating positively to oneself. It was then no longer difficult to distinguish, in a second step, forms of social disrespect in terms of the specific level of persons' practical relations-to-self they can damage or even destroy.” (SR 123) Here, the suggestion is as I have put it—disrespect undercuts what recognition cultivates. Yet it seems this leaves room for there to be no recognition at all, or the wrong sort of recognition, such that a practical relation-to-self does not get formed or is ill-formed.

5 *Recognition Theory and Extrasocial Criticism*

But recognition theory does not seem to explain an important class of social movements—namely, environmental movements. And this points to my fundamental worry with recognition theory—that it fails to put extrasocial criticism on foundations, thereby precluding a whole host of concerns regarding how society relates to what is external to it, including relations with what is external to society that might be necessary for human self-realization. Because recognition is taken as the condition required for human self-realization and thus the yardstick for social health generally, extrasocial relations fall away entirely. There is, evidently, nothing to be said about how social actors relate to the nonsocial world, or humans relate to the nonhuman world, from the perspective of Honneth's theory of recognition.

Extrasocial criticism is necessary for a number of reasons. Importantly, it provides an avenue to question the way we relate to the nonhuman environment, even if our evaluative frame is ultimately anthropocentric. And it is, I think, highly plausible that certain relations with our environment cultivate or undermine self-realization. Plus, it seems that an account of critical theory's normative foundations that precludes extrasocial criticism from the get-go cannot claim to be totally formal, for insofar as certain individuals and cultures consider certain relations to the nonhuman world to be necessary for self-realization, an account of critical theory's normative foundations that denies this ironically evinces a failure of recognition internal to the theory itself.¹⁸

¹⁸ An interesting challenge arises for theories of recognition once we distinguish intrasocial from extrasocial criticism. One pernicious type of recognition failure or disrespect is when people are not recognized as members of society at all. Along these lines, the boundaries of society itself (and in turn, between intrasocial and extrasocial criticism) already depend, in a sense, on recognition—on who is recognized as a member of society. And it will be hard to find some objective criterion for who is owed recognition that completely resists challenge. Suppose, for example, we say that recognition is owed to each human rather than to each member of society—the same problem arises for a similar (and similarly pernicious) type of recognition failure or disrespect, which simply denies that certain people are members of the species at all (as do some of the most virulent forms

Social philosophy, especially if it is interested in the conditions required for human self-realization, will always have to contend with questions like, “why society?” or “how social should we be?” because there will always be those who claim that society itself is what poses the problem, perhaps by precluding various extrasocial relations that are taken as necessary for self-realization. Considering the long tradition of extrasocial criticism in social philosophy and considering the likelihood that we are missing something important if extrasocial criticism falls entirely by the wayside, it seems that an account of the normative foundations of critical theory needs to provide foundations for both intrasocial and extrasocial criticism. At least, it should justify why it does not—for Honneth, this would involve establishing that *only* the sorts of recognition he describes is necessary for human self-realization. And if that is the case, then all that is left is to criticize the anthropocentrism this view expresses. But Honneth’s theory of recognition does not establish that no extrasocial conditions are necessary for human self-realization—it establishes that recognition is a condition for self-realization (potentially, one of many).

We live in an age that will challenge anthropocentrism. Humans’ relations with the rest are so brutal and callous and hard to witness that more and more people will come to see our treatment of the nonhuman world for what it is—unconscionable and morally scandalous. But we also live in an age that will challenge the notion that a worthwhile human life need not bear any relation in particular to the nonhuman environment which supports it, beyond simply supporting it. Critical theory is thus faced with a question: is the world described, here and in the introduction, a world for critical theory at all? I think it is, and so I think we must adjust—and we would do well to recall our origins (the critique of instrumental reason) in doing so.

6 *Updating Recognition Theory*

of racism). Recognition theory, along these lines, needs an account of who is owed recognition that is prior to recognition itself, and a strong justification for this account. But since recognition is largely a question of being seen and treated by others as having moral standing—being someone to whom something is owed—recognition theory will have trouble giving such a justification.

To conclude, I think there are three ways we might go about modifying recognition theory such that it provides foundations for extrasocial criticism. I cannot pursue any in detail here, and the most compelling potential modification (the third) must overcome the problem identified in the discussion of the critique of instrumental reason's anthropocentrism in section 3. Plus, these modifications run the risk of appearing a bit ad-hoc. Nevertheless, each is worth consideration. Along these lines, the intention of this brief reflection is less to defend the necessary modifications to recognition theory, but, more humbly, to gesture at them.

One involves demonstrating that people disrespect others by doing things that demonstrate flagrant disregard for others' values or for what others value, in such a way that denigrates their way of life. And this is not so hard to do. A television channel that broadcasts the slaughter of animals that are sacred to a particular group, for example, might plausibly be said to disrespect that group (depending on the intentions, etc.); and clearly, a company, government, militant group, etc., desecrating some group's holy sites is disrespectful—even if that group does not own those sites. To this effect, we can see certain environmental movements, in particular certain indigenous movements like Standing Rock, as recognition struggles, against a particular form disrespect. Thus, there is potentially a way, within recognition theory as it stands, to criticize the way that humans relate to the nonhuman world. But it is wholly contingent on some groups valuing the nonhuman world in such a way that mistreatment of the nonhuman world denigrates their way of life. And of course, there is a limit on this. People cannot just hold others hostage by saying that how those others relate to things they value denigrates their way of life—to give a dumb example, that I value apples very much does not mean that anyone who eats apples denigrates my way of life.

Recalling the distinction from section 2 between intrasocial/extrasocial criticism and intrasocial/extrasocial conditions for self-realization, we can see another way that recognition theory might provide foundations for extrasocial criticism. According to Honneth, the *conditions* for self-realization (the forms of intersubjective recognition discussed) are intrasocial. But that does not necessarily entail that obstacles to those conditions being realized are intrasocial—so recognition theory might provide foundations for criticism of

extrasocial conditions that are obstacles to recognition. In that case, though, recognition theory provides foundations for extrasocial criticism again only contingently, and that extrasocial criticism is wholly parasitic on the intrasocial conditions. Plus, this doesn't get at any of the worries expressed in the section above, having to do with the fact that we likely miss something in taking only intrasocial conditions as important for human self-realization.

Finally, the most promising modification to recognition theory (this one more significant) involves focusing more on the importance of recognizing others, rather than being recognized by them, for self-realization. I think it is fair to say that Honneth's theory of recognition, especially in its focus on the experience of disrespect, foregrounds *being recognized* more than it does *recognizing*. If we could establish that recognizing nonhuman or nonsocial others in particular ways is necessary for human self-realization, or that failing to do so presents an obstacle to human self-realization, then recognition theory can, in fact, put extrasocial criticism on foundations. Developing the recognizing aspect of the theory of recognition further, but as relates to human others, might be a good place to start. Of course, simply extending the *same* framework to nonhumans risks being offensive. Nevertheless, better understanding the recognizing aspect of self-realization will help us understand the nature of the distinction between humans and nonhumans, regarding the necessity of recognizing them for self-realization (and we certainly are not committed to saying that nonhuman others are *owed* recognition by going this route—but humans are). Of course, all this turns on an empirical question—is recognizing others necessary for self-realization, and, if so, which others?—that there is not space to answer here. Moreover, this route potentially faces the same challenge the critique of instrumental reason did—it risks giving way to anthropocentric criticism of anthropocentrism.

All said, then, there are potentially directions to take the theory of recognition, such that it better provides foundations for extrasocial criticism. Whether these modifications are ad-hoc, I leave up to the readers. But I hope that I have succeeded in establishing that extrasocial criticism is important, that accounts of critical theory's normative foundations

must put it, not just intrasocial criticism, on foundations, and that recognition theory has more work ahead of it, to do so.

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