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The Long Goodbye: On the Development of Critical Theory

Abstract: It is not easy to give up on a tradition that promises to rationalize, explain, and thereby ultimately help improve, society. This article narrates the history of Critical Theory in three stages, following the dynamics of its own self-criticism during distinct historical periods and within different societies. Horkheimer/Adorno, Habermas and Honneth are read as participating in a philosophical project of societal rationalism which can be criticized by appeal to a pragmatist view of social theories, and specifically the ‘pragmatic maxim’. In spite of its post-metaphysical announcements, Critical Theory overextends itself when it seeks to reconcile fully the normative and the empirical. An alternative, and more explicitly ethical and empirically controllable, scheme for critical theories (plural!) is suggested.

0. Why We Need Critical Theory

The idea of a ‘critical theory’ of society—importantly, of society as a whole—has dropped out of present debates in social philosophy and the social sciences, and it may have dropped out for good. Moral and political philosophy have regained the intellectual terrain they lost to Marxism and the newly emerging discipline of sociology at the end of the 19th century. Today statements about how to improve society are typically suggestions for small-scale improvements to special institutions within society, backed up by reference to ‘our’ moral intuitions, a common moral knowledge taken as given among a representative part of citizens, or, even more abstractly, among humans. This ‘ethical turn’ away from epochal societal alternatives has at least two benefits: it has led to more easily realizable proposals for small-scale social improvements and to a turn away from purely descriptive and sometimes even nihilistic attitudes towards morality.

Following the ethical turn, morality can now be seen as a practically relevant part of social reality. But at the same time the ethical turn has widened the gap between moral philosophy and empirically assessable social forces, especially those not present (or presentable) in straightforward personal interactions and relationships. Morality per se brings with it an appeal to ideals, and moralists easily succumb to the temptation to lose sight of the manageable. Moral philosophy carries within itself a tendency not simply to remain academic, but to lose contact altogether with other, more empirically inclined disciplines

like psychology, economics and sociology. In line with the discipline as a whole, moral philosophers are eager to develop a technical vocabulary to capture their arguments—even though the distance that separates philosophical analysis and the practice it takes as its object is even greater in moral philosophy than elsewhere. Moral philosophers frequently get bogged down in details of moral theory that have no clear connection to the trends that dominate social life; and those working in applied ethics are often unaware of the larger institutional framework necessary to put their normative contribution into perspective.

This lacuna can in part be traced to the withering away of Critical Theory, which for some time provided a platform for the confluence of normative and empirical thinking. Even if underdeveloped in its normative part, it emphatically tried to achieve a balance between normative and empirical diagnoses, and to orient its reflection toward important tendencies and institutions of the whole society. If Critical Theory declined, this was surely not due to its narrow-minded professionalism, but rather to the large—some would say excessive—scale of its vision. This decline is interesting in its own way. It may be taken as a document of the impossibility of casting a normatively oriented glance at society, especially present-day society, as a whole. A better grasp of this impossibility, in turn, could be helpful in working out lower-level syntheses of normative and empirical analyses of social phenomena. Giving up on a theory of society as a whole could make room for more practically useful analyses of functional parts of society. This, at any rate, is the idea the present article seeks to develop.

So far my references to ‘critical theory’ have been allusive only. Normally it is the Frankfurt School which travels under this name, and in a sense I think this tradition is the best one from which to learn about critical theory. To introduce us to its basic ideas I will consider Horkheimer’s sketch, in his seminal article, of what such a theory amounts to (1). Throughout I will distinguish lower letter ‘critical theory’ from the capitalized trademark of the Frankfurt ‘Critical Theory’. This distinction makes room for considering positions sympathetic to some but not all elements of the original version. One of the aims of this article is to make this distinction clearer and to point out ways in which critical theory may be geared to more modest claims. My own, more low-key, approach to critical theory, for example, aligns itself with American pragmatism. To explain this approach, I will early on make some remarks on the ‘pragmatic maxim’, one of pragmatism’s central ideas (2). With the idea of the pragmatic maxim in hand, the trajectory of Critical Theory can, I think, be traced more easily.

For a start, I take Horkheimer’s destructive critique of pragmatism to be a symptom of how the first generation of Critical Theorists lacked a sense of the possibilities inherent in their sole normative concept, instrumental rationality. Critical Theory’s fancy flight, in famous tracts like the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, suffers from too narrow a concept of rationality, or so the story goes (3). Habermas seeks to improve on this by introducing his famous idea of communicative rationality, yet ultimately his project too is overly demanding. The shortcomings of Habermas’ projects can be traced, in a nutshell, to his problematic idea that communication as such has a *telos*, pushing societies to a teleological development (4). Honneth improves on the rationalist deficits of the Habermasian

approach, but again finds himself driven to put one social mechanism, ‘recognition’, at the centre of his version of a critical theory. I follow Nancy Fraser in thinking that Honneth’s approach risks totalizing one mode of social integration and neglecting or distorting others. The exchange between Fraser and Honneth is, to my mind, particularly helpful to illuminate the difficulties with the teleological tradition of Critical Theory (5). This tour through three successive versions of Critical Theory indicates what, in spite of the significant developments along the way, all the versions share: each has at its core a philosophically abstract idea, be it a concept of rationality or an overstrained psychological principle.

A critical theory that is both normatively and empirically more realistic would instead be guided by the pragmatic maxim. But lacking an overarching *telos* or concept of rationality, we can no longer provide strong arguments for using this maxim to reach an acceptable point of normativity. The loss of a teleological concept of rationality opens a multitude of ways in which to relate to society’s normative ideas and intuitions. I will suggest one, most akin to the pragmatist approach; but whether we accept it is ultimately a political decision. There are many ‘critical theories’ then, once we have abandoned the metaphysical legacy in Critical Theory (6).

1. The Claims of Critical Theory

In asking whether a specific action is rational or not, we normally presuppose a norm of rationality. If pressed to be more specific on this norm (e.g., the norms of rationality guiding psychiatry), we have to engage either in conceptual clarification or in sociological reconstruction of a specific part of society (for example the applied criteria guiding mental health assessments). Conceptual clarification, as practised in philosophy, refers us to a small set of explications of the ‘concept’ of rationality. Once this concept is clarified it can be viewed from two different perspectives. Either one takes this concept as a last ‘datum’, a self-sufficient reality, or one takes it to be an abstraction from more concrete phenomena, phenomena of activities within society. Given the first alternative, one can safely neglect the social forces involved in the genesis of the concept (as, put simply, the concept has its own reality). Given the second, one faces the problem that the concept itself is conditioned in a way that requires understanding if we are to understand something with the help of the concept. In the spirit of Horkheimer’s classical article we can identify the first alternative as ‘traditional’ and the second as ‘critical theory’.

The label ‘traditional theory’ is meant to apply not only to the philosophical claim to self-sufficient knowledge, but also to the claims of the natural and social sciences, insofar as they abstract away from the genetic conditions of their own knowledge. There are two different problems involved with knowledge that is oblivious to its origins. In the context of the sciences, scientists are not in control of the social functions of their knowledge, and yet a function it unavoidably has. Philosophers of the traditional sort—Horkheimer bundles them together under the label ‘idealists’—legitimize this loss of control with their claims to epistemic

self-sufficiency, and they add to it ethical claims of an equally universal, allegedly unconditioned kind. In their role as epistemologists, the idealist philosophers strengthen the belief in ‘eternal truth’ concerning empirical matters, both in the natural and the social sciences. In their role as ethicists, the idealist philosophers believe in the feasibility of concepts like ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’, in a way that is analogous to their instrumental optimism regarding scientific knowledge. If, however, knowledge itself functions under social conditions, then both suggestions are highly misleading. Scientists are not in control of the social function of their theories, and citizens are not in control of the social reality of freedom and equality. Being conditioned itself, traditional theory engages in obscuring these facts by the illusion of practically effective yet self-sufficient knowledge.

A critical theorist, on the other hand, is aware of the functional role knowledge plays within the larger society. This claim, however, raises the threat of circularity or regress. If the theorist knows the function of a piece of knowledge and is thereby able to relativize knowledge, this meta-knowledge in turn either has or has not a particular social role in society. If the former, a problem of regress ensues; if the latter, a piece of idealist knowledge is involved. Insofar as the first alternative involves a regress it undermines itself. Critical knowledge can therefore only be understood as a special kind of idealist knowledge. In a sense Horkheimer admits this, though his acknowledgment of the problem is buried under a rather odd combination of terms.

“[...] the critical theory of society begins with the idea of the simple exchange of commodities and defines the idea with the help of *relatively universal concepts*. It then moves further, using all knowledge available and taking suitable material from the research of others as well as from specialized research. Without denying its own principles as established by the special discipline of political economy, the theory shows how an exchange economy [...] must necessarily lead to a heightening of those social tensions which in the present historical era lead in turn to wars and revolutions.” (Horkheimer 1975, 226; my emphasis)

Appealing to the help of “relatively universal concepts” seems awkward, and covers up the systematic problem Critical Theory encounters. Horkheimer tries to make use of two traditions. As the quotation makes clear enough, one is the tradition of classical Marxist economics. This economic theory is meant to help explain how scientific knowledge functions socially. A second, Kantian, tradition is needed, however, as late Marxian theory does not provide a rational norm for future society. Horkheimer at times refers to reason as the full transparency of human existence to itself, but he passes over the conflicts between the two traditions he wishes to align himself with. Kant’s claims to rationality, especially the ethical ones, cannot be taken for granted if the economy is simultaneously placed at the centre of critical theory.

In order to outline a more formal account of ‘critical theory’, I shall at this point attempt to reformulate Horkheimer’s critical project with the help of a concept introduced into recent discussion by Rawls. This is the concept of a

society's 'basic structure'.¹ For critical theory, a structure is basic insofar as it meets two requirements, one *functional* and another *normative*. First, a structure is functionally basic if it is supportive of and causally responsive to a representative part of society.² Second, a basic structure is to be related, internally or externally, to a form of rationality which not only plays a constitutive role for the functional side of the basic structure, but also provides standards to judge this functional side. There are two apparent alternatives as to how rationality could relate to the functional side of the basic structure. Either there is only one kind of rationality, relative to which the present basic structure is judged. If this judgment is to be critical, rationality cannot be fully functioning within the present basic structure, but must somehow be malfunctioning or present only in a pathological form. Alternatively, there are (at least) two forms of rationality, with one functionally exemplified in the basic structure while the other is suppressed. The latter, if it were implemented, would bring the basic structure into proper shape. Let us call these the 'one-rationality' and 'two-rationalities' solutions. Habermas definitely favours the two-rationalities position, whereas Horkheimer and Adorno waver between the two options. If I am correct, Horkheimer early on (and in contrast to Marx) favoured a Kantian rationality that was to be held as an ideal over and above the instrumental rationality present in existing society. Yet books like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason* present the one-rationality position only.

Indecision between these two approaches results from the conflicted relationship between the normative and the function requirement on the basic structure. Traditional theory, we must remind ourselves, would explain and reflect a basic structure by using rational norms that are not themselves considered as part of this structure. Traditional theory is not transparent to itself as it neglects the functional role rationality plays in society. Critical theory, in contrast, seeks to functionally relate rationality to society's basic structure. If rationality were not functionally related to the basic structure, it would remain abstract and utopian. If it is related functionally, however, its normativity threatens to dissolve. If a basic structure is in one and the same sense functional *and* rational, there is no longer a sense of 'critique' involved. Critique asks for a difference between fact and norm. In order to permit critique, critical theory must avoid identifying the functional and the rational side of the basic structure.

¹ Rawls normally denotes with "basic structure" the most important institutions of a society, including its "political constitution and the principal economic and social arrangements, [...] competitive markets, private property in the means of production, and the monogamous family are examples of major social institutions [...]" (Rawls 1971, 7; see also Rawls 1977). Rawls never tried to offer a theoretical analysis of the basic structure; in the terms of this discussion, he was a traditional theorist, and believed such an analysis to be futile. Strangely enough Rawls to my knowledge until quite recently (Murphy 1998) has never been criticized for the empirical vagueness of his usage of "basic structure".

² There has been an extensive debate on the logical transparency of such functional claims. I take them to be explainable at this point, without detailing this further. For defences see Cohen 1978[2000], ch. 10; Kincaid 1994; McLaughlin 2001. The debate mentioned did not touch on the serious problem important for critical theorists of how to integrate the two requirements. Jerry Cohen especially defended a purely empirically-functionalist reconstruction of historical materialism without ever troubling himself with questions of integration.

I believe this problem of a balanced integration of functional and normative requirements is the central and ultimately fateful challenge for critical theory. So let me pin it down terminologically and refer to it, in the following, as the ‘*synthesis problem*’. The problem arises because the two requirements not only do not coincide empirically; they are also and more importantly incompatible in principle. ‘Full transparency’, as required by some Critical Theorists, neglects the synthesis problem, while usually also nonchalantly neglecting the source of normativity. The deeper source of the problem seems to lie in the regrettable fact that humans are rarely in complete control of their intellectual operations. Thus they create a deficit in explanation at the same time that they engage in justification, and vice versa. Another way to put this is simply to refer to the conceptual fact that justification and explanation are two different intellectual operations, one displacing the other. Accordingly, we can think of a state of affairs where both operations are active at once (‘transparency’) only as either extremely bad or extremely good, but definitely not as typical of ordinary human life.

How did social theorists prior to Horkheimer and Adorno react to the conflicting demands that a theory be both functionally adequate and normative? As the synthesis problem did not receive the attention it deserves, very rough solutions were in circulation, some unduly optimistic, others too pessimistic. Marx and many Marxists were on the optimistic side, supposing that when the capitalist form of instrumental rationality has destroyed itself, free and healthy rationality develops. Weber had a more pessimistic vision of the consequences of instrumental rationality. In his theory of ‘rationalization’ he did not think that instrumental rationality destroyed itself, but that it endlessly produces more effective forms of economy, bureaucracy, and science. Means-end rationality is the rationality of efficiency, and the development of modern societies is moved by the extension of systems of rationality. On the positive side, rationalization leads to the ‘disenchantment of the world’, i.e. the increase of subjective freedom as against former spiritual authorities. Negatively, however, this freedom is constrained by the dominating institutions of efficiency. Social relationships are depersonalized and mechanized, and individual lives have to be lived according to arbitrarily selected ends.

Horkheimer and Adorno further radicalized Weber’s already bleak picture of modern society. In contrast to Weber, they did not see a fundamental change from ‘value’ and ‘traditional’ rationality in premodern societies to means-end rationality in modern ones. For them, Weberian rationalization was only an acceleration of a large-scale process which had begun in pre-Hellenic times. In a famous chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Odysseus becomes the first historic individual capable of strategic action and rationalized production. For this he pays a price: the newly created forces of rationality under which he puts himself are dehumanizing. When reification is seen as such a large scale phenomenon, the possibility, still offered by Weber’s diagnosis, that there is an alternative to reification vanishes. There is no way out of reification by means of discursive thinking if such thinking is per se reifying. The only escape, taken later by Adorno, seems to be found in an activity outside both discursive

and instrumental thinking: mimetic art. There are grave epistemic doubts as to whether this Hegelian idea of mimesis makes sense; more importantly, mimetic art can hardly provide a convincing conception of the basic structure. Looking at society from the artistic point of view becomes as utopian as the positions embraced by earlier idealist philosophers.

2. A Pragmatist Approach to Critical Theory

Current lore has it that Horkheimer and Adorno's desperate conclusions grew out of the bleak historical situation they were in during the early 1940s, but were also, and more importantly, the result of the excessively narrow conception of rationality within which they were working in the wake of Marx, Lukacs and Weber. In the terminology I introduced earlier, they took a one-rationality position even though the logic of the critical theory they sought to develop required a two-rationality position of the sort introduced by Habermas later on. Habermas, who introduced his own proposal of communicative rationality in combination with an extensive historical reconstruction of the rationality deficits of his critical forbearers (1984, ch. IV.2), is the prime source of this lore. As there are, I think, serious difficulties involved with Habermas' own proposal, which will turn out to be the flip-side of Horkheimer/Adorno's difficulties, I do not share his diagnosis of his predecessors' predicaments. Problems surface in both approaches, it seems to me, from a *imbalance* between the functional and the normative requirement, or (in more traditional terms) an inadequate relation between 'theory and practice'. Making use of a wider concept of rationality is, as we will see, also problematic because it too leads to one-sided conceptions of the basic structure.

To prepare for a more systematic approach to the problems involved, I want to introduce the idea of the 'pragmatic maxim'. As William James famously commented, this maxim is difficult to formulate, and thus it is all the more important to grasp its spirit.³ The spirit is this: the meaning of a concept or a sentence is in the practical consequences of its usage. Perhaps more illuminatingly the pragmatic maxim could also be called a principle of 'meaning consequentialism' or 'truth consequentialism', meaning and truth lying in the practical consequences of use and knowledge.⁴ Critics of a similar approach in moral philosophy, 'ethical consequentialism', know that one of its difficulties arises in evaluating the consequences: which values are we to presuppose and how are we to justify them?

³ James 1909, 99. Some equally famous formulations are: "'Grant an idea or belief to be true,' (pragmatism) says, 'what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life?'" (1909, 3)—"*The true*, to put it very briefly, *is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaving*. Expedient in almost any fashion, and expedient in the long run and on the whole [...]" (1909, 4)—"The 'workableness' which ideas must have, in order to be true, means particular workings, physical or intellectual, actual or possible, which they may set up from next to next inside of concrete experience." (1909, 7) In the Preface of *The Meaning of Truth* (1909) James quotes these formulations from his earlier lecture on truth in his *Pragmatism*. See James 1907, Lecture VI, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth".

⁴ See Davidson 1984 for the interdependency of meaning and truth.

Could my thinking not change the value of the consequences, and thereby make the criterion futile? The problem posed by the interdependence of the value of consequences on the one, thinking on the other hand seems to grow exponentially in the case of meaning or truth consequentialism. It appears viciously circular to make good consequences a criterion of meaning or truth. Does one not have to presuppose understanding of a word in order to identify the consequences of its use? And need not something be true in order to see what it is good for? One way to make the consequentialist's view plausible is to point to the context that is *necessarily given* for a word to have meaning, or for a sentence to be true. What the pragmatic maxim says is: behaviour within this context—and 'context' is taken in a wide practical sense including practical activities—decides about meaning and truth.

What the pragmatic maxim adds to the usually granted dependency of meaning on meaning or knowledge on knowledge is the inclusion of *practical activities*. The consequences in practice, for example the reactions of other speakers or the running of an experiment, are an important part of the consequences. Why should one restrict consequences to the sphere of meanings or knowledge, thereby involving oneself in the problem of how meaning and knowledge are related to the rest of the world? Of course, this formulation of the pragmatic maxim smacks very much of a narrow version of verificationism. Let me distinguish, therefore, a *critical* and a *constructive*, or a *negative* and a *positive* reading of the pragmatic maxim. According to the negative version, concepts are senseless if they do not make a difference to our practical life; according to the positive version, concepts are meaningful and/or true according to the value/truth the consequences of their usage have. The positive version needs a more careful explication as it seems either too adaptive to a given context or circular if meant more reflectively. At this very point the meaning of the pragmatic maxim connects with the synthesis problem. I will come back to this connection in my comments on the Fraser-Honneth exchange.

But even if we make use of the negative version of the pragmatic maxim first, this version, too, needs explication. To start with one of James' statements (quoted in Footnote 3 above): "Grant an idea or belief to be true,' (pragmatism) says, 'what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life?'" The suggestion involved here is that if an idea or a statement does not make a difference in actual life, we can safely neglect the dispute about the meaning or truth of this idea or statement. The point here is whether a dispute is relevant or not, and not whether an idea has the meaning supplied by its practical purpose or effect, or whether a statement is true if it fulfils a practical given end, and false if there is no such end. In other words, the pragmatic maxim, negative version, does not opt for immediately identifying meaning and truth with given aims within a given practice; it does not suggest a narrow verification principle. Rather it suggests a wide verification principle, requiring a dispute about meaning and truth to be practically relevant. No doubt for ideas and statements 'to be practically relevant' they have to address, to some extent, a given situation (where a 'situation' is characterized both in terms of common knowledge and social actions). "Humans are immortal" is surely a statement the truth of which

would make a difference in actual life. We can safely neglect the statement, though, if a dispute about the statement will not make a difference to actual life according to common knowledge. Those who do not engage in dispute about the statement would justify their reluctance by pointing to the missing pro-argument. They do not believe that further dispute would make a difference.

The pragmatic maxim, to sum up, suggests a method of how to relate thought to social practice and so to meet the requirement of critical theory, i.e. to take into consideration the social conditions of thought and knowledge. The real effects of knowledge and thought within a social practice, be it the effect of solving empirical disputes or of meeting practically useful demands, are a sign of critical, as against traditional theory. There may have been aspects in the writings of the initiators of pragmatism, Peirce, James and Dewey, which rightly drew the scorn of Horkheimer and Adorno. But the extent to which especially Horkheimer misread the pragmatists' aims (in his 1947 book *Eclipse of Reason* as well as in other parts of Horkheimer and Adorno's writing at this time) illustrates the first generation of Critical Theory's own failure to come to terms with the synthesis problem. This is especially so in light of the shared interests between pragmatism and critical theory just sketched.

3. Horkheimer's Friendly Fire

Horkheimer, in the book mentioned above, places his criticism of the pragmatists in the context of a distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' rationality (1947, 3–12), both forms of which fall prey to his criticism. Objective rationality is meant to summarize the metaphysical tradition of 'contemplation for and in itself'; subjective rationality relates to the empiricist tradition's concern with the rational fulfilment of desires. Horkheimer's example of the former is Neo-Thomism, that of the latter pragmatism. The conceptual distinction between objective and subjective rationality, taken to be exhaustive, is significantly narrower than the distinction between 'idealist' and 'materialist philosophy' drawn in the earlier programmatic articles of Critical Theory.⁵

Horkheimer was, unfortunately, by this time not very much interested in giving a fair hearing to pragmatism and thus missed the opportunity to find a way out of the impasse the version of critical theory he developed with Adorno had worked itself into. On the one hand, he was not willing to follow his scepticism of 'objective rationality' through to its radical conclusion, namely that this rationality is illusory in *all* its forms, including the concepts famously deployed by the Enlightenment philosophers (1947, 26–30, 33, 43). On the other hand, he could only make fun of the experimentalist elements in pragmatist thinking (47–55). Pragmatists often argue that experimentation is necessary to find out what the consequences of an idea or statement are. This, surely, is too general a claim because one would like to know more about the kind of experimentation at stake. But in a sense experimentation must be involved in discovering the consequences of meaning and truth. There is obviously a reciprocal practical

⁵ See Rush 2004 for a helpful overview of these beginnings.

dependency between a statement and its verification, as is clear from the experimental science—speculation about an in principle different relation of thought to practice participates in what Horkheimer calls objective rationality. By polemicizing against the naivety of the pragmatists who wished to elevate experimental physics to the master science, Horkheimer simply overlooked that he himself would have to remain a Neo-Thomist of sorts if he was not willing to accept a constitutive connection of thought to practice.

A more charitable reading of Horkheimer's critique is surely possible. On such an interpretation, he is not criticizing (as he definitely is) the attempt to relate thought to practice in principle; he is merely objecting to excessively crude strategies for achieving this in practice, including those forms of 'reified' thinking present in the society of his day. Remarks on the purely economic value of art (40) or the instrumentalization of leisure time through the category of 'hobbies' illustrate this side of his reception (38). This kind of social criticism can be granted, of course; but it indicates a weakness in both pragmatism and Horkheimer's background theory, as both are unable to provide clearer criteria for exactly when the relation between meaning and consequences is 'reified'. It is not fully clear, for example, that hobbies are rigidly rationalized forms of behaviour or that, for art to be good, it must not be economically successful. What is missing in such (often light-minded) asides by both Horkheimer and Adorno is a proper standard for distinguishing reified and free social actions. Habermas' improvement on the first generation's work in critical theory is meant not least as an answer to this deficit.

4. Habermas' Communicative Teleology

At this juncture I will skip Habermas' proto-version of communicative rationality in his early book, *Knowledge and Human Interest*. There is a story, included in Habermas' later commentary on this book (Habermas 1999), that his postulate of three anthropological interests was still metaphysical, something to be corrected by his later linguistic-pragmatic approach in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Whatever the deficits of the earlier book, it did as much as the later one to sharpen the perception of a social mechanism, a basic structure of sorts, that linked interests, actions and normative social networks in a manner answering both the normative and the functional requirement. This basic structure that thus led Critical Theory out of its impasse is 'communicative rationality'.⁶

Communicative rationality is a structure postulated as the foundation of normal, everyday social relationships. It can, on the occasion of conflicts, be actualized in specific social events called 'discourses'. In discourses, communica-

⁶ One may be sceptical of Habermas' self-criticism insofar as the interests postulated in his earlier work too were based on a reconstruction of the action-theories of Peirce, Dilthey and Freud. How far apart one takes *Knowledge and Human Interest* and *The Theory of Communication* to be depends on the opaque relationships the latter book suggests between its communicative theory, its reference to sociological classics and its sketch of a renewed 'empirical critical theory'. It is beyond the scope of the present article to judge the profundity of this web of ideas.

tive rationality subdivides into argumentative exchanges involving three different types of ‘validity-claims’, those of empirical truth, normative rightness, and expressive authenticity. Communicative rationality again looks at first like a very abstract postulate, and in a sense that is what it is. In a second step, however, Habermas tries to distinguish three different social spheres in which such validity claims are commonly made, exposing as it were the material side of this kind of rationality. He even talks of three different ‘worlds’ (1984, ch. I) corresponding to the claims of empirical truth, normative rightness, and authentic expression. I will come back to this material side of communicative rationality in a moment. Let us look first at how this wider concept of rationality compares to the position taken by earlier proponents of Critical Theory.

According to Habermas, the wider conception of communicative rationality gives short shrift to simple instrumental rationality. By differentiating between instrumental or (if applied within the social sphere) ‘strategic’ rationality and communicative rationality, Habermas is in a position to recognize and appreciate central achievements of modern society. These achievements become visible through the tripartite distinction of claims, which enables a more differentiated view of conflicts and suggests a positive interpretation of some specifically modern achievements—such as universal law, the distinction between law and morality, and democratic institutions based on ideas of freedom and equality. This move is meant to save important parts of society from the diagnosis of ever extended reification. Its success depends, however, on a speculative and contentious claim concerning the normative core of communicative rationality. That, for Habermas, communicative rationality definitely has a positive moral content makes for a crucial difference to earlier Critical Theory; but it has also exposed the proposal to continuing scepticism on the part of many readers.

In order to see more clearly the move Habermas made, it may be helpful to again take a look at the problematic scenario within Critical Theory. Take the dramatic story of rationalization as told by Horkheimer and Adorno (and retold in detail in Habermas 1984, ch. IV). Rationality in the sense of subjective or means-end rationality calls into question objective rationality; eternally objective ends turn into pieces of ideology within this framework. Means-end rationality makes actors succumb to the never-ending expansion of means because it devalues all ends by transforming them into arbitrary subjective attitudes. Ends are turned into the products of the ‘culture industry’, and shown to be in need of critique and justification. Weberian rationalization expands the class of means because, somehow in parallel, ends lose all claims to objectivity. To stop this process of rationalization, *definite ends* are needed, and their retrieval is possible only by rehabilitating something objective. This is where *morality* comes in, even if it is no small task to rehabilitate morality in such a situation of endemic scepticism. ‘Communicative rationality’ answers the need for definite ends.

What is meant by ‘communicative rationality’? Habermas wants to take up the achievements of the ‘linguistic-pragmatic turn’ via this concept. His interpretation of this turn proceeds in two steps. First, engaging in reasoning at all (which is definitely at the core of rationality) calls for reasoning with and against

other persons; second, reasoning with others is necessarily bound up with a moral recognition of these others, a recognition incorporating a form of freedom and equality. As the second step in this explication of rationality connects it with what are clearly moral aspects, rationality turns out to be not only ‘communicative’, located somehow within everyday communication and the exchange of reasons implied therein, but also necessarily connected to an ethical interpretation of this exchange, and thus of communication per se. At the basis of everyday communication, the potential of free and equal social relationships is buried—and had been buried safely until Habermas came along and uncovered it. In order to bring out the significance of this observation, however, at least two claims related to it have to be made definite.

First, the proposal is not to be reduced to its trivial reading, i.e. to the simple claim that communication and the exchange of reasons *can be* used in the context of, and in order to advance, free and equal social relationships. Reasoning, in good instrumental manner, could be seen as achieving given ends, including the establishment of morally appropriate relationships. This purely instrumental interpretation would of course be a return to the situation depicted by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Weber. One needs moral motives in the first place in order to establish free and equal relationships. And, given the mechanism of rationalization, it is doubtful whether these motives are produced by social processes in capitalist society. In order to avoid the trivial reading of communicative rationality, it thus has to be shown that freedom and equality are in a sense *necessarily* bound up with the very possibility of reasoning. If reasoning is *inherently* ethical, it is not at the mercy of instrumental rationality. Rather instrumental reasoning itself is ‘parasitic’ on the moral motives inherent in reasoning. Morally neutral rationality is possible, but only against the backdrop of morally loaded rationality. Rationality—at the most ‘basic’ level of the concept—is necessarily ethical (see Habermas 1984, ch. III).

As one pursues this claim further one engages more deeply with the normative side of the basic structure of ‘communicative rationality’. But there is also the functional side to be taken care of. Given that the concept of rationality is necessarily ethical, what does this say about existing society? The concept may be ethical, but must this make a difference to society as it is (rather than as it ought to be)? In order to meet the functionality requirement, communicative rationality has to be materialized in influential parts of society, something to be documented by empirical diagnosis independent of the conceptual claims concerning communicative rationality. The empirical spheres that correspond to the tripartite rationality claims must be spheres of public societal debates, debates or discourses concerning truth, normativity and authenticity respectively. Scientific, politico-ethical and aesthetic debates seem to be the typical social correlates, and when these debates occur, they should provide motives and foster initiatives to change society in the direction of an increase in truth, rightness and authenticity. The corresponding social spheres must be thought of as spheres incorporating and transposing communicative rationality into manifest powers of directional development. As far as the politico-ethical sphere is concerned, this development must be one towards a freer and more equal society. Unless pro-

cesses of social communication are restricted by ‘pathological’ forces, a manifest development is to be expected.

The programme set before us is ambitious on two counts. There is the *conceptual claim* concerning communicative rationality and also the *empirical claim* of this rationality being so deeply embedded in real societal processes that its empowering of these processes (or its being itself empowered by them) becomes manifest. As the empirical processes themselves are in need of theoretical reconstruction in light of communicative rationality, the conceptual claim takes priority over the empirical claim. Typical political debates, for example, could also be explained within an agonistic theory of social power; politics shows many signs of an endemic struggle for power. Only if communicative rationality can be taken for granted, can these phenomena be explained as pathological side-effects of a more ‘pure’, consensual politics. Whether or not politics can be reconstructed as consensual depends, then, on the idea of communicative rationality. This idea has to be made convincing prior to empirical reconstruction.

The idea that the very possibility of communication has built into it, as Habermas claims in one of his most famous statements, a ‘*telos*’ of reciprocal agreement (‘*Verständigung*’),⁷ is surely fascinating. Habermas suggested two arguments in favour of this claim, the ‘universal-pragmatics’ conception of ethical presuppositions for every speech-act, and the argument concerning a close link between truth and consensus. Both arguments have drawn an extensive amount of scrutiny, and it may be a fair summary of the debate that hardly anybody is convinced by either argument.⁸ Reasoning with others, to sketch one objection to the first claim, is possible within a social situation of *unequal power*. And, against the second claim, truth is something to be *aimed at* by consensus, not something identical to it. Instead of looking more deeply into the pros and cons of the two arguments, I would prefer to consider the idea of an ethical *telos* within communication from the perspective of the pragmatic maxim, negative version.

If an idea does not make a difference in practice, it is futile to speculate about its reality. This may seem to suggest that the practical maxim—applied counterfactually—provides support for the idea of an ethical *telos*. For if communication had an underlying ethical *telos*, would not the postulated positive ethical development become real, and would this not make a difference in practice? But, as suggested in section 2, this is not in fact the sense of the pragmatic maxim, negative version. Many fancy ideas could be verified with this purely counterfactual test: if humans were immortal, that would make a practical diffe-

⁷ Habermas 1984, 287. The other, closely related and equally famous line is the one on the “unrestricted force of the better argument”.

⁸ Statements like this one are difficult to buttress. My impression is that the most sympathetic and congenial critique was first formulated in Wellmer’s 1986 article *On the Critique of Discourse Ethics*, which took the two central pro-arguments to task. See Wellmer 1986. For my own criticism see Leist 1989. Habermas later abandoned consensus theory, but to date seems to hold on to morally loaded communicative presuppositions. For another critique which concentrates on Habermas’ ambitious priority statement of communicative over strategic interaction, see Johnston 1991. Johnston points out that most of Habermas’ conceptual arguments are too ambiguous to be easily assessed. Given this state of claims it seems to me more profitable, therefore, to sidestep conceptual wrangle and to use a method such as the pragmatic maxim.

rence, so they must be immortal. What has to be taken into account, instead, is our ‘everyday reality’ *as it is*, by and large. The pragmatic maxim, negative version, is a *contextual test*, which questions an idea *within a given practice* (while granting the practice a certain mutability).

Now, it seems that the teleologist and the pragmatist can happily agree on the empirical degree of freedom and equality in our present society, the only difference being that the teleologist has to stick to a statement of the *necessary* extension of this state into the future, whereas the non-teleologist has to admit the contingency of such a future. The pragmatist will be wise, in part following Hume, Smith and Marx, to see material production rather than communication as the most important moving force within society. If industrial capitalism is established in a society, the ideas of freedom and equality, even if not fully realized, seem functionally proper for this state of society. Marx in a sense was right when he commented on the *Gotha Programme*’s demand for justice by saying that justice is the very product of the capitalist/worker relationship.⁹ Marx merely disregarded the potential within the idea of justice thus made possible. A more fully developed idea of justice is in a position to question this very relationship even though the relationship has facilitated its development in the first place.

Where does this leave us regarding Habermas’ proposal of an ethical *telos* built into communication? If the *telos*-idea is definitely meant to include a prediction of the future of the sort just sketched, it appears extremely implausible. Human communication has been around for millennia, whereas freedom and equality are rather recent achievements. If the *telos*-idea is explicated less daringly, and is combined with social forces outside of pure communication such as psychological needs and technological possibilities, the proposal becomes so contextual that its claim to being the necessary link between communication and morality is indistinguishable from the more empirically minded pragmatist approach. The alternative seems to be, therefore, either hold fast to the *telos*-idea and do a very bad job on the side of the functionality condition, or to give up this idea and make room for a basic structure which permits functionality in balance with normativity.

If this critique of the philosophical project connected with the concept of ‘communicative rationality’ is plausible, the normative content of freedom and equality does not arise from a logical deep structure underlying linguistic-communicative exchanges. Instead, and less mysteriously, it comes about through exchanges between people shaped by the moral beliefs of freedom and equality achieved at this historical stage of their society. Communication as a teleological source of development then drops out of a critical theory. Does rationality in terms of reasoning and intersubjective consensus also drop out? Not necessarily, I think. When critical theory is forced to choose between Marx *or* Kant, Horkheimer/Adorno *or* Habermas, instrumental *or* ethical rationality, the misleading

⁹ “What is a just distribution? Do not the bourgeois assert that the present distribution is just? And isn’t it in fact the only just distribution based on the present mode of production? Are economic relations ruled by juridical concepts, or do not, on the contrary, juridical relations arise out of the economic ones?” (MEW 19, 18)

(and typically German) impression arises that if morality cannot be a form of rationality, it must be destructively instrumental, and real society is somehow in moral danger. Habermas develops his discourse theory within this dichotomous framework. But the dichotomy is false. There can be a moral conviction, widespread among people within Western societies, which focuses on the right of others to be offered a justification for what is done to them, and, more specifically, to be offered a justification they cannot reasonably reject. This claim to 'reasonable non-rejectability' works on the basis of a culture of freedom and equality; in light of growing differences in value judgments, morality is reduced to a right to justification. Scanlon (1998) does not attempt to provide a deeper philosophical justification of this right, and in the light of the pragmatic maxim, negative version, such caution is wise.

Let me summarize these remarks on Habermas by translating communicative rationality into the pragmatic maxim in another way. Habermas is not infrequently read as a kind of pragmatist himself, and there is a point to such a reading. What I said first about the negative version of the pragmatic maxim could be reformulated like this: ideas (statements) are not worth contemplating if they would not make a difference in *discourse*. And positively: ideas (statements) have the importance or truth they are assigned in *discourse*. This second formulation may seem to gravitate toward a consensus-theory of truth; but it is not necessarily meant to identify truth-verdicts in discourse with truth full stop. Even if these formulations may be acceptable as far as they go, they would constitute a rather truncated form of pragmatism, or of critical theory, as they relate ideas and statements *only to discourse*, isolating them thereby from activities by speakers in a larger sense. Early Critical Theory followed the Marxian intuition that it is the sphere of production which is responsible for most of our ideas and statements. That may have been a one-sided intuition; but it still meets the functionality requirement better than one that reduces this requirement to a purely discursive affair. Not every application of the pragmatic maxim, in other words, satisfies the claim of a critical theory to relate knowledge and science to representative parts of society.

5. Honneth's Recognition Programme

Let me reformulate the conditions for a critical theory, drawing on the findings so far. Habermas was right to attempt to add another form of ethical rationality to the first generation's exclusive focus on instrumental rationality. Society cannot be understood without understanding the norms regulating cooperation, and moral norms basically fulfil this role. Habermas was wrong, I think, in taking ethical rationality to be something categorically different from instrumental rationality, thereby making transcendental claims and separating the empirical spheres of society in a way obstructive to the aims of a critical theory. In giving categorical priority to spheres of communication, Habermas becomes blind to the significance of empirical inquiries into which social spheres might be most successful according to critical theory. By defending discourse ethics, this ques-

tion is decided a priori. From this categorical point of view, the rich findings on the importance of moral norms within the economic tradition (be it game theory in sociology or contractualism in ethics) are rejected as ‘naturalistic’ or ‘ideological’ because of their dependence on instrumental rationality. If, by contrast, the a priori distinction is cancelled, moral norms fall into a specific category of instrumentally rational norms based on empirically given motives and conditions.¹⁰

After introducing the dichotomy of ‘lifeworld and system’ in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas himself, in a sense, gave up on finding a standpoint within society that is at the same time normative and qualified in functional terms. I believe this is a consequence of the a priori claim to communicative rationality: if there is an a priori certainty that norms of cooperation—or, in a wider sense, morality (including justice)—can only arise through reciprocal discursive recognition, searching empirically for a balance between norms and functions becomes superfluous.¹¹ Either society matches discursive morality or not: if not, so much the worse for society, as seen discursively. Stripped of its aprioricity, however, Habermas’ approach again becomes open to the experimental question of which kind of rationality empirically fits best with the two requirements of a critical theory.¹² It was Honneth’s basic idea that recognition might be the very mechanism central to society which only has to be freed from discourse-rational restriction in order to make good on the deficits of Habermas’s a priori position. It is thus with some justification that Honneth, in a review of more recent answers to this problem, places his attempt to put Habermas ‘back on his feet’ side-by-side with Habermas’ own position and against three others.¹³ What Honneth did was to keep the concept of recognition, and expand it descriptively.

The way he wished to do this is most visible in his exchange with Nancy Fraser. This exchange is most helpful for my comment on critical theory here, as both parties concentrate on critical theory under conditions similar to the ones I have considered, characterized by “its distinctive dialectic of immanence and transcendence” (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 202). Also, their debate on the relationship between two spheres of society, those of redistribution and recognition, brings into view a multitude of thematic and methodological aspects acutely relevant for the fate of Critical Theory. Fraser and Honneth defend opposing

¹⁰ See Habermas 1984, ch. I.3. for criticism of the economic tradition, something that pervades the whole of Habermas’ work. See Baurmann 1985; Tugendhat 1985; Johnson 1991 for critical comment.

¹¹ One further consequence is the ensuing problem of integration, once life-world and system are pulled as far apart as Habermas has it. In the words of Honneth: “[...] it is not advisable to theoretically isolate purely economic or systemic factors from cultural elements with regard to the capitalist economic order.” (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 156)

¹² ‘Empirical’ is to be taken with a pinch of salt here, i.e. to be understood as against a non-empirical *philosophical* claim. Obviously, the whole idea of meeting these extremely general requirements presupposes interest in an abstract philosophical perspective, yet one that keeps a keen eye on social realities.

¹³ Fraser/Honneth 2003, 242. According to Honneth he shares with Habermas a socio-structural idea opposed to these other, psychological, approaches adopted by Castoriadis, Marcuse, the late Foucault, and Butler.

positions on this relationship, Fraser voting for an ‘analytic dualism’ which insists on the irreducibility and normative separateness of both spheres, Honneth pursuing a form of monism which gives normative priority to the effects of recognition. If the sketch I have given of Critical Theory so far is right, its tradition is monistic in orienting itself to one dominating idea of rationality; Fraser’s move to a theoretical dualism constitutes a breach with this tradition. Dualisms however are, as we know, problematic. Fraser’s position might not only serve to put Honneth’s monism into perspective, but also to pave the way to even greater differentiation, accepting politics, law and science as additional irreducible spheres.¹⁴

To put Honneth’s view of society very simply: there is one and only one social mechanism constituting the ‘normative core’ of society, and that mechanism is social recognition. The existence of this normative core is established by identifying forms of social mis-recognition (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 131), and it is taken to manifest itself specifically in three different psychological phenomena: *love*, *respect* and *esteem*. These three concepts stand both for principles and for empirico-normative realities in society, which are structured by (or manifest themselves as) love, respect and esteem. ‘Love’ materializes as affective recognition within family relationships (or personal relationships in a wider sense). ‘Respect’ stands for the moral and legal guarantees within the sphere of civil society. ‘Esteem’ identifies forms of recognition within the sphere of work and production, and it acquires material concreteness most clearly in the achievement principle at the workplace. There are two points in particular that Honneth has in mind when drawing this distinction of spheres. First, again, recognition is the one and only integral master mechanism behind different spheres. The earlier criticism of Habermas emphasized the strict distinction between lifeworld and system. Similarly, Honneth takes all ‘system’-characterized, non-personal processes to somehow originate in or be related back to personal relationships, and thus holds that they can all be controlled by standards of recognition.¹⁵ Secondly, there is a ‘surplus validity’ involved in the forms of recognition mentioned. Once introduced, they offer the potential to be expanded, thereby creating normative pressure on the relationships such as they are. The achievement principle, for instance, can be applied in a non-distorted way, which leads, e.g., to acknowledgement of female contribution as mothers to the reproduction of society (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 153–155).

Honneth expands this second point so as to involve a “conception of progress”. Only if such a conception is available, he thinks, can the danger of relativism

¹⁴ This would be a consequence incompatible with the theoretical views of both Fraser and Honneth. As a second reason for putting themselves in the tradition of Critical Theory (besides ‘immanent transcendence’) they mention this tradition’s aspiration to ‘totality’. “[...] both of us aspire to theorize capitalist society as a ‘totality’. Thus, we reject the view that casts ‘grand theory’ as epistemologically unsound and politically depasse. On the contrary, both of us believe that critique achieves both its theoretical warrant and its practical efficacy only by deploying normative concepts that are also informed by a structural understanding of contemporary society, one that can diagnose the tensions and contextualize the struggles of the present.” (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 4)

¹⁵ For such a statement see Fraser/Honneth 2003, 157.

be kept at bay (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 184). Progress, according to him, makes itself felt by an increase in individualism and social inclusion, which are both made possible by processes of recognition in the three social spheres. These two conditions of progress are problematic, however, since they are at least at times mutually incompatible. Unless a harmonizing psychological theory is presupposed, individualization will further social conflicts or emphasize the importance of the private/public distinction within society. In other words, such a conception of progress (attractive though it is in parts) offers no guarantee that social development is a directed, teleological and irreversible process. Rather, the opposite is to be expected.

Let me put this issue aside and return to the question at the centre of this article: in what sense is Honneth's approach continuing or abandoning the tradition of Critical Theory, and what are its prospects? As has been noticed by others (see Thomson 2005, 93, 97), Honneth wavers—under the critical attack by Fraser—between a *strong* and a *weak* reading of his recognition programme. According to the strong reading, psychological recognition underlies all three forms of recognition, and the achievement principle plays a major role in the distribution of material goods. This is how Honneth at times presents his position (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 142, 160, 250). On the weak reading, by contrast, 'recognition' is nothing but an umbrella concept which connects but does not ground the phenomena Honneth analyzes. It thus abandons the strong reading's psychological foundationalism. On this weak reading the role of principles of recognition in production would have to be put more modestly. As has been pointed out, Honneth partly distances himself from the strong reading by placing only moral "constraints" on social processes (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 249). If he himself is not consistent in his adherence to this weak and negative formulation, this may be because such a formulation threatens to completely undermine the integrative theory he wanted to achieve with the recognition proposal. The weak reading may even be compatible with Fraser's observation (convincing to my mind) that economic distribution depends at least as much on contingent market processes as on any morally justifiable desert of the workers engaged in production (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 215). And this would be an acceptance of Fraser's 'perspectival dualism' which grants each of the production and distribution spheres an irreducible autonomy.

In a more recent paper, Honneth again presents himself as a defender of the strong reading, yet he cannot, I think, make his case look any more plausible (Honneth 2008). To be fair, the paper is meant more as a plan for empirical research than as an explicit description of empirical matters. Drawing on Durkheim's concept of 'organic solidarity', Honneth suggests that consciousness of individual contribution to the common social good is a necessary motor for societal integration, and thus important for every society to stabilize itself. Durkheim's own requirements for social cooperation were highly idealistic, asking for fairness and transparency in the remunerations of individual contributions to the common good. Honneth recognizes Durkheim's moral idealism, and yet tries to hold on to the same idea, which he contrasts with a normatively neutral form of 'systems integration' (2008, 341). If only we search hard enough, Honneth thinks, a social

glue must become visible within the production process. He even suggests that moral motivations are underlying economic exchanges. Speculations like these are much less plausible than Honneth's earlier reference to psychological recognition, as they require workers to see their contribution within a wider societal perspective than they can be expected to. Markets do not provide a substitute for a utilitarian welfare-principle; the achievements they remunerate do not as such contribute to a 'common good' that has moral significance. If there is an integrative element in work, it is through individual acceptance of the working conditions and their outcome in light of their contribution to one's own life; social integration is not brought about by individuals intending the good of society. The moral conditions of the working process tend to be ones of fairness, equality and equal opportunity, and not those of a common societal project.¹⁶

Given Honneth's proposed three spheres (or stages) of recognition, this leaves us with the observation that all of these forms of recognition may be important, both individually and socially, but that they are dependent on (or structured by) different kinds of conditions: those of psychological health are at the basis of the first sphere, those of legal norms and institutions at the basis of the second, and those of the market at the basis of the third. All three spheres are characterized by different and internally complex functions, a complexity which makes it hopeless, I think, to talk of a 'common core' of recognition in more than the most formal sense. If there is something like a normative common core to these spheres, it seems to be a minimalist egalitarian morality, most explicitly stated in the legal sphere, but partly materialized in the other spheres as well. Yet, even if it is easily visible in the legal sphere, this morality may nonetheless not be functioning as well as it could in this sphere. The obvious problem with Honneth's project is now this: once the overarching claim to a social mechanism which is at once both normative and empirical, 'transcendent' and 'immanent', moral and functional is missing, we are simply left with different spheres while losing a grip on the social mechanism behind these spheres.¹⁷

Where does this leave us in the debate between Fraser and Honneth? I agree with Honneth that Fraser's alternative of answering the 'immanent transcendence' query with a deontologically stated idea of 'participatory parity' is not convincing either (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 260). In analogy to the attempt to situate a social relation of equality within psychological recognition, Fraser tries to reformulate our idea of equality in a model of participatory democracy. This model she sees represented by those political movements that offer principled protest against social restrictions (Fraser/Honneth 2003, 38–42). But it is inherently problematic to take political movements as a possible basic structure that meets the two requirements. Such movements are either as normatively

¹⁶ Even if there is much rhetorical use of 'justice' in public political debates and in wage bargains, nobody would be in a position to present substantive criteria for just wages, save such weak conditions as minimum wages, hazard wages or equal pay for equal work.

¹⁷ This is obvious from the beginning of Honneth's development of a tripartite model of recognition in Honneth 1996. If psychological recognition is not constitutive of respect or esteem in production, empirical functional equivalences for respect and esteem have to be provided. Such mechanisms would have to relate to the political process on the one hand and to production on the other.

convincing as their programmatic principles are, in which case it is their principles that bear the normative weight. Or they are politically powerful, but the principles they work to advance may not be egalitarian. A basic structure that meets the two requirements of Critical Theory is meant to provide an explanation that shows that some principles *necessarily* tend to be realized; and political movements seem not to be a case in point.

6. Concluding Thoughts

What must have become obvious at this point is, first, that Critical Theory's most prominent representatives have not succeeded in identifying a basic structure, a piece of social reality that could be expected to meet the normative and functional requirement. Instrumental or communicative rationality, social recognition or political emancipation, that is, the proposals made by Horkheimer and Habermas, Honneth and Fraser, are not capable of overcoming the serious difficulties which become apparent once their respective programmes are more fully developed. It is not, surely, that these theorists looked in the wrong places for their proposals. If there is a basic structure that is both normatively valid and empirically important for society, it should be one related to actions and behaviours most important for human beings—and work and communication, social recognition and political emancipation definitely belong to the most important activities humans are capable of. If none of these proposals works, prospects are dim that any other will fare better.

What cannot be given up in order for a 'theory' to be 'critical' is the two-sided requirement. As pointed out earlier, these requirements will never be on the same level; the functional must always be either behind or ahead of the normative. Giving up the normative would mean total reification; giving up the functional would mean total ideology and illusion. Part of moral philosophy borders indeed on illusion and does not provide a way out of our problem—even if such a moral illusion is itself strongly functional. What characterizes Critical Theory, however, is a specific *additional* interpretation of the two requirements. Such an interpretation is most explicit in Habermas' metaphysical idea that a social medium exists which is able to fulfil both requirements at once. The 'unrestricted force of the better argument', or even more succinctly, the insight into truth, is the classical candidate for such a medium, and the idea behind it is this: once an actor grasps the truth of a normative statement, he cannot but act on it. Insight into truth has to realize its content. This idea is metaphysical because it cannot be assessed empirically. It is classically metaphysical, and falls in the same class as the famous proofs of God that conclude from the concept of God to his reality. But, of course, just as there is no concept that necessarily realizes itself, so there is no basic structure that does so either. But if there is not, the two requirements cannot be met. Critical Theory, to conclude, cannot succeed.¹⁸

¹⁸ The spiritual and religious sources in Critical Theory via Benjamin and Adorno have always been obvious to most of its students: see especially Buck-Morss 1977. However, unlike

If one must let go of the one Critical Theory, one need not give up on critical theories, plural. There are two questions of primary interest in the critical theory tradition. First, what could be a positive relation, neither reified nor illusory, between the normative and the functional? Second, if one has to give up the aspiration of ‘totality’ and face a number of social spheres not reducible to one another, which one to concentrate? Here are some remarks, guided by the pragmatic maxim. We saw that there is a difficulty in applying the maxim constructively, but also that its negative version cannot be applied without giving it positive sense. To give an answer, I think, we have to see the ‘positive’ of the maxim under the aspects of two central moral intuitions, freedom and equality. Calling these (in Rawlsian manner) ‘intuitions’, first, helps steer clear of a term like ‘ideas’ and, second, accentuates that what the words stand for is a vague, emotionally laden experience of ours that requires further elaborations on future occasions. Both intuitions, therefore, do not fall prey to the pragmatic maxim, negative version. Moral philosophy normally makes it a constructive job to develop ‘principles of justice’ out of these two intuitions. What distinguishes a ‘critical theory’ from, for example, Rawls’s theory of justice, is an additional interest in *maximal realizability*.¹⁹

Reminding ourselves of Horkheimer’s first characterization of ‘critical theory’, such an explanation of what ‘critical’ could mean seems to me to fit with his original idea, albeit purified and without some of the aspects he originally attributed to it. ‘Reason’ now is clearly understood morally, the normative identification of rationality with the production process is avoided, and the kind of reflexivity that makes a theory ‘critical’ depends on the way it handles its own functionality. Universalists will respond that the two moral intuitions need ‘philosophical clarification’. I would agree with the demand insofar as political clarification is concerned, but would (in Rortian manner) deny the need for a philosophical account. One objection to this definition of a theory being ‘critical’ might be that it could, within a thriving market, elevate a Hayekian liberalism to a ‘critical theory’. I cannot see this as a danger. It is not the case that unregulated markets are continually thriving; nor are there any arguments circulating against Hayek other than moral ones. His theory is uncritical in the sense that it suppresses important facts and unduly prioritizes freedom over equality. Hardly anything else (in principle) need be said against it.

pragmatists Critical Theorists hardly ever tried to get rid of *all* their religious burdens. Habermas and Honneth regularly pigeonhole absolutist, Marx-inspired motives as ‘Left Hegelianism’, but hold on to the religious motive in a more rationalized, thinned-down manner.—The systematic point behind the connection between knowledge and realization would become more plausible if one were to identify ‘action’ with ‘understanding’ or were somehow to build other bridges between cognitive and practical activity, activity in the widest sense. It is normal, everyday actions which make the idea of a necessary connection between thinking and acting metaphysical. See Dancy’s (Dancy 2000) moral realism for a more recent metaphysical attempt principally in line with Critical Theory.

¹⁹ To be clear, for some time now a revisionary development has been underway within the Rawlsian tradition which aims at making Rawls’ ‘transcendental justice’ (Sen) more practical. See especially Murphy 1998 and now Cohen 2008. But this new development involves, at least in part, a strengthened moralism rather than a deepened social realism.

There are, on the other hand, different ways of clarifying the two moral intuitions and, accordingly, of relating them to different parts of society, or to basic structures (this concept has now itself become pluralized) effecting maximal realizability. There are always conflicts involved between moral clarifications and the realizability option, and as our basic intuitions will hardly decide all of these conflicts, there will be a plurality of solutions. Unemployment insurance is more easily realizable than secure jobs. Banishing unpleasant foreigners from a country is easier than properly educating and integrating them. In both cases, it is surely a contested matter whether the claims of freedom and equality are refuted by the fact that the other option is more easily realizable. As far as I can see, ‘rational discourse’, ‘recognition’, ‘organic solidarity’ or ‘participative parity’ do nothing to solve these conflicts; nor do these abstract notions help us when it comes to bringing to bear on the different options our moral intuitions and the insights we gain from careful inspection of actual consequences. When a master-structure can no longer be presupposed, things cannot easily be broken down.

The second question is more systematic: Which spheres should be taken care of with an ethical-functional reconstruction entitled ‘critical’? Again, a central normative basic structure that gives priority to either production, communication, the family, political struggle or whatever, is missing, and so empirical prognoses may be all one can feel assured of. Careful critical theorists like Honneth hardly grant priority to any one of the different spheres they consider.²⁰ To be ‘critical’ in the social sciences does not imply, then, having a special analytical preference for, say, either family, politics or the market, as there is no common frame into which these spheres could be pressed and in which they could be compared. Functional comparisons between them cannot be entertained as there is no overall functional frame to which they could be related. We cannot decide—and this seems to me fundamental—whether our activities in terms of freedom and equality suggest more powerful consequences in family, politics or production. Patterns of resistance may be different, of course, production perhaps being the hardest to penetrate morally. But practical consequences within families are also limited, and the fate of politics is dubious. On the one hand, in order to be critical a social theory has to be practical, directed to social change. On the other hand, the forces it wants to affiliate itself with are difficult to judge, and especially difficult to assess comparatively.

I am siding, however, with a suggestion made by Rorty in his comment on Fraser’s equating in social importance symbolic recognition with material production (Rorty 2000, 13). Rorty opts for the position that material goods are more important than increasingly developed cultural ‘identity differences’, and therefore for redistribution as a more immediate task than finding the adequate politics of difference. To me, given my moral priorities, this seems right and a statement like the one by Fraser that “egalitarian redistribution struggles, hitherto central to social life, have lately receded to the margin” (Fraser/Honneth

²⁰ In Honneth’s case this was once different, when he tried to hold on to the Marxist priority of the work-sphere: see Honneth 2000a; 2000b. His soft spot for Hegel and Durkheim in Honneth 2008 suggests the same tendency. I have much sympathy for this idea, but fail to see arguments that would support it.

2003, 48) strangely myopic. During periods of calm in between actual crises of capitalism, conflicts of recognition may move into the foreground. But it seems unrealistic to expect from the cultural sphere massive changes independently of an increase in welfare in material goods. These are intuitions many economists, and not just Marxists, share, but to provide conclusive arguments for them would be difficult and perhaps impossible.

At the end of this long and laborious development of Critical Theory, we are, I fear, left with nothing that looks like a theory at all. But this should not be too disturbing. After all, the practical interest Horkheimer put at the centre of critical theory itself encourages one to have an eye on the practical side of social theories and in this sense to sharpen a critical attitude towards them—not dependent on a metaphysics of rationality.

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