

Regev Ben Jacob

Toward a Pure Ontology? A Critique of Axel Honneth's Theory of Reification and
Recognition

Spring 09

University of Virginia

Politics Department Graduate Conference

Toward a Pure Ontology? A Critique of Axel Honneth's Theory of Reification and Recognition

Its eyes—less a man's than a dog's,
 And even less a dog's than a thing's—
 Would follow the rabbi through the equivocal
 Twilight of the dim unworldly retreat
 ...
 The rabbi gazed fondly on his creature
 And with some terror...

—excerpt, "The Golem" by Jorge Luis Borges

I. Introduction

In the essay "Reification and Recognition: A New Look at an Old Idea," Axel Honneth aims to revive the concept of reification by developing it into a coherent model for a social pathology based, in part, on its comprehensive treatment by the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács. Honneth attempts to reconstruct the concept of reification by remaining faithful to the original spirit of the phenomenon identified by Lukács while at the same time reinterpreting it in light of some important philosophical insights of the past century. In a general sense, reification refers to the condition of a subject viewing or treating another person or being as a mere thing—that is, as a kind of entity stripped of its qualitative significance in its place in relation to a human life. In order to more comprehensively elucidate what this reification might look like as a more plausible contemporary iteration, Honneth develops a complementary notion of a primordial kind of "true" or "genuine" praxis, one that he labels recognition. For him, this form of recognition is forgotten when one experiences reification and treats another being as a "mere" thing.

In their assessment of the development of this concept, Honneth's critics share a high degree of skepticism as to whether the elementary recognition he posits is sufficiently developed to justify the moral tone he gives in his description of intersubjective relations at the ontological level. Nevertheless, in a response to his critics, Honneth argues that recognition, in his sense, referred only to the condition of the possibility for taking any kind of moral stance. With this, Honneth to some extent has conceded their point while to some extent managing to absorb their criticism.

In this essay, I will critically consider Honneth's remarks on his notion of an elementary form of recognition, which is central to his concept of reification. With his critics, I will argue that Honneth, despite his statements to the contrary, implicitly loads the concept of recognition with positive normative content that cannot be sustained by the kinds of ontological arguments he makes. While his response to this claim may be initially convincing, I suggest that Honneth's strategy falls into an inherent ambiguity that may, despite his intentions, give a normative status to his account of elementary intersubjective recognition. I hope to show that his commentators are right to criticize Honneth's apparent ambivalence to the moral dimension built into his account of recognition, but also that they miss one of the crucial operations whereby the moral presuppositions of primary recognition slip into his theory. Beyond this, however, I will question the way in which Honneth pushes his account of intersubjective recognition in the direction of a "pure ontology," where, at bottom, the recognition of the other is somehow already universally guaranteed. Because Honneth to some extent makes use of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger to construct his theory, I will occasionally rely on important insights from Heidegger's philosophy to argue that, perhaps in crucial respects,

Honneth's ontology downplays the certain elements of the constitutive and disclosive role of language, broadly construed, and the ways in which they might problematize his picture of elementary recognition. In the course of exploring these questions, the adequacy of the recognition-reification as respective modes of genuine and pathological praxis will be assessed. In the concluding portion of the essay I will attempt to loosely thread these last two concerns together. The goal of this essay is to explore several central problems raised by Honneth's account of recognition and reification at the intersubjective level. My narrow focus in this regard will prevent me in this paper from exploring more systematically all of the complex issues involved in Honneth's laborious and provocative work (including the issues of self-reification and non-human reification).¹ Nevertheless, I hope to bring to light several unresolved concerns that emerge from this important element of Honneth's theory.

II. The Question of a Polysemic Concept of Recognition

In the beginning of his essay on reification and recognition, Honneth tells us that in one of its basic formulations, “‘reification’ signifies nothing but the fact ‘that a relation between people has taken on the character of a thing.’”² In other words, this kind of “pathology” means that we are treating instrumentally and as mere things those beings that we would, free from reification, somehow treat differently and perhaps more genuinely. That is, under the condition of reification we subject our relationships to

¹ Additionally, because this paper is in many respects a preliminary and exploratory one, at this point I abstain from considering its broader significance in relation to Honneth's other published works. Most of my questions and arguments, therefore, are largely arise from Honneth's arguments in the essays contained in the volume.

² Axel Honneth, “Reification and Recognition: A New Look at an Old Idea,” *Reification* (New York: Oxford University 2007), 21.

others to a type of cold calculation that is not appropriate to them. Further, he tells us that this kind of pathology extends also to the treatment of a range of different entities.

Honneth is quick to distinguish that, for Lukács, this does not amount to a mere instance of cognitive or categorical error, such as an instance of misapplying a mental category. Nor is it a moral mistake, as if somehow one has intentionally violated a moral truth or principle by treating other human beings instrumentally. Rather, Lukács in his analysis means to draw out something more pervasive, deep, and continuous in the lives of subjects in modern capitalist life. Honneth provides us with the following description of Lukács's concept reification: "[A] habit of mere contemplation and observation, in which one's natural surroundings, social environment, and personal characteristics come to be apprehended in a detached and emotionless manner—in short as things."³

As this description shows, Lukács is clearly concerned with a denuding of our affective relation to the world and others. It is this affective core that Honneth wants to explore and reinterpret. It also becomes apparent as one reads Honneth's essay that he intends means to identify those elements characteristic of reification as reaching down to the level of ontology. In other words, reification will be defined as a mode of perception and orientation towards beings in the world that we have at the most basic level. For Lukács, however, the kind of inappropriate orientation toward beings he calls reification is intimately tied to structural elements of capitalism. In his eyes, as capitalism expands and digs deeper roots, reification becomes the dominant form of praxis. And this form of praxis, for Lukács, is not without its negative normative dimension: "[Reification] must form an ensemble of habits and attitudes that deviates from a more genuine or better form

³ Honneth, "Reification and Recognition," 25.

of human praxis.”⁴ Lukács in a first gesture aimed at describing a genuine praxis as relies on a kind of Fichtean “unmediated” unity or identity between the subject and object. For him, this kind of harmony between subject and object is attained through the “productive activity of the species,” whereby the subject as *homo faber*, the human being by virtue of his role as producer, has some special access to a deeper, more basic level of reality.⁵

Honneth, however, rightly finds this grounding unconvincing and theoretically unjustified, especially when one takes into account contemporary philosophical insights into the constitutive and mediating role language plays in human life. Further, this kind of unmediated praxis would fail to account for our relationship to those kinds of objects that are not created as a result of our productive activities.

Nevertheless, Honneth seeks other moments in Lukács’s work that hint at an alternative account of an authentic form of praxis, one that for him “possesses precisely the same characteristics of empathetic engagement and interestedness that have been destroyed by the expansion of commodity exchange.”⁶ Honneth calls such praxis, one “characterized by empathetic and existential engagement,” recognition.⁷ Perhaps we can further describe this notion of authentic recognition as one where we have a basic and deep affective experience of the involvement in the uniqueness and richness of those beings we encounter in our interactions in the world; that is, we see beings in the peculiar way they come to matter for us. Thus, for Honneth, the concept of Reification will turn out to mean the condition of “forgetting” of this essential and initial orientation. In this way Honneth appropriates the original spirit of Lukács’s notions, while simultaneously

⁴ Honneth, “Reification and Recognition,” 26.

⁵ Honneth, “Reification and Recognition,” 29.

⁶ Honneth, “Reification and Recognition,” 27.

⁷ Honneth, “Reification and Recognition,” 29.

evacuating them of their problematic links with a totalizing Marxist critique of capitalism. Doing this, Honneth believes, will allow him to appropriate both recognition and reification as useful contemporary concepts for social philosophy.

As this initial sketch shows, much of Honneth's arguments about reification depend on its relation to his arguments for elementary recognition. It is because of the weight attributed to recognition in this essay that I wish to focus on the way Honneth's reinterprets and appropriates it. In order to do this, however, it is important for me to unpack more carefully the way in which he redeploys this concept. After doing so, I want to deal with the question of what could have led Honneth's critics to believe that he was concerned primarily with developing a broad normative basis for recognition. More importantly, I want to raise the question whether, despite his disavowal of a moral dimension at this stage in his theory, his concept of recognition is nevertheless built on premises that implicitly lead him to posit a normative core in a problematic fashion.

Honneth begins the development of his account of recognition by reinterpreting Lukács's alternative version of genuine praxis through a discussion of its affinities with Heidegger and Dewey's thought. He writes the following of Heidegger:

According to Heidegger, we do not encounter reality in the stance of a cognitive subject, but rather we practically cope with the world in such a way that it is given to us in a field of practical significance...For in engaged activity, the subject no longer neutrally encounters a reality that still remains to be understood, but is existentially interested in a reality that is always already disclosed as having qualitative significance.⁸

Again, while the initial clue for a genuine, non-reified praxis began with Lukács, Honneth must, in order to make it more convincing, modify it according to important insights of contemporary philosophy. As such, Heidegger is probably an appropriate

⁸ Honneth, "Reification and Recognition," 30.

place to start. One of Heidegger's major goals of *Being and Time* was to take on the longstanding philosophical schemata of subject and object. That is, Heidegger wanted to show that we are not merely "disengaged" subjects that encounter a world of objects upon which we superimpose meanings, but rather, that we are beings already displaced, dispersed, and constituted alongside those entities in the world with us. In a similar vein Honneth writes:

Just as is true of the mode of care, in interaction the world is not centered around us; instead, we experience situations in such a way that we 'take care' to maintain a fluent interaction with our surroundings. In what follows, I will refer to this primordial form of relating to the world as 'recognition' in its most elementary form. In living, we constantly concede to the situational circumstances of our world a value of their own, which brings us to be concerned with our relationship to them. On this elementary level, the concept of recognition thus shares a fundamental notion not only with Dewey's concept of practical involvement, but also with Heidegger's care and Lukács' engaged praxis; namely, the notion that the stance of empathetic engagement in the world, arising from the experience of the world's significance and value (*Werthaftigkeit*), is prior to our acts of detached cognition. A recognitional stance therefore embodies our active and constant assessment of the value that persons or things have in themselves.⁹

Heidegger in Division I of *Being and Time* wanted to advance the claim that we do not encounter the world primordially in the manner of a *cogito* neutrally apprehending facts or phenomena. This is signaled by the German word *Dasein*, which Heidegger chooses to name human beings. *Dasein* literally means there-being and is meant to signify the idea that who we are is intimately tied up with the world we find ourselves in. Thus, by characterizing one of *Dasein*'s basic features as *being-in-the-world*, Heidegger places himself in opposition to the traditionally loaded picture of the human being as a self-sufficient and overly cognitive subject.¹⁰ For Heidegger, we are beings that already find

⁹ Honneth, "Reification and Recognition," 37-38.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), 225. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), 171. Heidegger writes: "By its very nature, *Dasein* brings its 'there' along with it...*Dasein* is its disclosedness...But in so far as the essence of [*Dasein*] is existence, the

ourselves oriented to various meanings and projects that are already familiar to us. In a related sense, he also describes *Dasein* as “thrown” into a pre-disclosed world of familiar beings. Moreover, the disclosure of phenomena and its meaning is crucially opened up for *Dasein* through an affective orientation or mood. Not only is it through this affective engagement that we always already find ourselves involved with familiar beings, but also we are engaged in their significance—the specific way they matter for us.

We should briefly note that while it has now become somewhat apparent that what Honneth means by recognition as originary involvement and familiarity with the world and the beings in it, the worry also grows that the name he chooses to give this fundamental engagement, “recognition,” is somewhat awkward and perhaps unfortunate. The reason for this is that, as Honneth clarifies in his rejoinder to his critics, this form of elementary recognition is only a first stage of a larger project of building a normative theory of intersubjective recognition, which he has been concerned with developing¹¹. Thus, he wants to think of this kind of recognition as a prior condition of the possibility for any kind of further elaboration of a more developed moral theory of recognition. Yet, by naming both stages “recognition,” Honneth’s reader, and perhaps even Honneth himself.

At this point, I wish to point to a more significant ambiguity in Honneth’s description of recognition. This problem involves questioning the way Honneth, to some extent, conflates the meaning of elementary recognition and genuine praxis. I will only follow the thread of this problem in a preliminary way here, but I will pick it up again in

existential proposition, ‘*Dasein is its disclosedness*’, means at the same time that the [b]eing which is an issue for this entity in its very [b]eing is to be its ‘there’.”

¹¹ Honneth, “Rejoinder,” 148.

the final portion of the essay to assess its relationship to what I will later characterize as Honneth's attempted "pure ontology" of intersubjective recognition.

Let us return to the passage previously cited, where Honneth describes recognition both as a kind of everyday coping *and* a concerned assessment of intrinsic value:

[T]he notion that the stance of empathetic engagement in the world, arising from the experience of the world's significance and value (*Werthaftigkeit*), is prior to our acts of detached cognition. *A recognitional stance therefore embodies our active and constant assessment of the value that persons or things have in themselves.*¹² (my emphasis)

Even though Honneth acknowledges that affective involvement is prior to cognition, is it right to say that our everyday dealings with the world involve reflecting, in a strong sense, on the intrinsic worth or value that "persons or things have in themselves"? The problem here becomes clearer if we recall that for Heidegger, for example, our everyday dealings with the world, including our affective orientation and investment in it, becomes so transparent that it inevitably causes us to take certain things for granted and often leading us to treat beings as natural, ordinary, and perhaps even banal. This is the phenomena Heidegger called "falling." While both Honneth and Heidegger identify an affective orientation towards beings as an important component of our engagement with the world, Heidegger further differentiated between an everyday mode of praxis and an "existentially" engaged one. For him, falling meant to convey the way that in our everyday coping we don't necessarily actively reflect on the qualitative significance that persons and things have for us.

¹² Honneth, "Reification and Recognition," 37-38.

However, because Honneth sets up reification as a pathology, he implies that under normal circumstances we exhibit genuine, non-reified praxis. But, again, does it make sense to think of our normal way of dealing with the world (our non-reified way of dealing with the world) as an “active and constant assessment” involving an existential engagement in any rich sense? It is hard to see exactly in what manner Honneth thinks we are engaging in this assessment when involved in the kind of genuine praxis he wishes to call recognition. It seems that Honneth, by remaining within the recognition-reification binary, does not distinguish clearly between 1) the kind of attitude involved in our everyday coping with the world, including the basic affective orientation that we always already experience *and* 2) the kind of attitude and affective orientation we have when we “tune in” to the rich specificity and particularity of the significance of the beings we deal with in a truly existential way. Honneth simply seems to run the two together: if I am not experiencing reification, then I am adequately attuned and engaged. I will return to this problem later in the essay when considering the status of genuine praxis in light of deeper concerns about Honneth’s arguments about the specific character of intersubjective recognition.

III. The Priority of Intersubjective Recognition

Throughout the course of the essay, Honneth positions his account of elementary recognition in such a way that its priority is shifted away from an existential involvement with beings in the world in general toward an affective involvement primarily with other

human beings.¹³ I will claim below that various problems arise specifically from the way Honneth does this. I will now turn to look more closely at how Honneth comes to emphasize the priority of the intersubjective aspect of elementary recognition in the essay.

As previously noted, Honneth relies on Heidegger and Dewey in the first stages of the article to develop and elucidate Lukács's alternative but implicit version of recognition. At this stage of his argument, he only wants to establish that recognition involves an affective engagement with different kinds of beings at the ontological level, whether they are human or not. Thus, recognition here does not merely mean taking another's point of view, because this would unnecessarily narrow the concept's application solely to relationships between humans. Moreover, taking another's point of view is a form of empathy too often interpreted in an overly cognitive manner, something Honneth wishes to stay away from. He writes, "[Heidegger and Lukács] didn't conceive of the stance embodied by care or by empathetic engagement as applying solely to the other subject involved in human interaction, but in principle to any and every object in the context of human praxis."¹⁴ This distinction is important for Honneth because it enables him to argue that taking another's point of view, including understanding their motives, desires, and reasons for acting is itself premised on a prior shared involvement in a common world: "I contend...that this ability to take over the perspective of another person is itself rooted in a kind of antecedent interaction that bears the characteristic

¹³ While Honneth treats reification and recognition as experiences that affect one's relations with one's self as well as non-human beings, the bulk of his argument treats reification and recognition as intersubjective experiences.

¹⁴ Honneth, "Reification and Recognition," 34.

features of existential care.”¹⁵ Similarly, for Heidegger, our *being-in-the-world* meant to signify a holistic kind of involvement where the significance with beings and others is already experienced as equiprimordial.¹⁶

However, Honneth, in exploring theories of developmental psychology (which I will not consider here due to limitations of space) and in his discussion of Cavell’s notion of “acknowledgment” (which he describes as being similar to his notion of recognition) moves to isolate and give priority to the intersubjective aspect of recognition. In doing so he does not want to say that our existentially engaged stance with non-human beings is erased, but rather, that it is a derivative phenomenon of our engaged stance with other human beings:

But only now with recourse to Cavell has it become possible to go beyond the temporal sense of this assertion and defend its *categorical* meaning, for according to his analysis, we can understand the meaning of a particular class of linguistic propositions only if we are in a stance or attitude which he describes as ‘acknowledgment.’ To put it briefly, the acknowledgment of the other constitutes a non-epistemic prerequisite for linguistic understanding.¹⁷

In the second half of Honneth’s essay, there is a subtle but important shift: what he is calling recognition is now at bottom *not* rooted in our empathetic engagement with the world in general, which is relegated to a secondary status, but rather is rooted in intersubjective recognition. This kind of primary form of recognition, or “acknowledgment,” mainly refers to the fact that others show up for one as unique kinds of beings whose recognition involves an affective opening or orientation towards them. This affective comportment is what then opens, as it were, our communicative channel

¹⁵ Honneth, “Reification and Recognition,” 41.

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 225. Heidegger writes: “Being-in-the-world is a structure which is primordially and constantly whole... To be sure, the constitution of the structural whole and its everyday kind of [b]eing, is whole as such phenomenologically in a way which is *unified*... Being alongside the ready-to-hand, belongs just as primordially to Being-in-the-world as does Being-with-Others; and Being-in-the-world is in each case for the sake of itself.”

¹⁷ Honneth, “Reification and Recognition,” 50.

towards others and, as a consequence, the field of intelligibility and significance in general. Thus, Honneth tells us, reification in its main intersubjective form involves a forgetting of this initial kind of affective recognition of others:

[I]n this kind of amnesia, we lose the ability to understand immediately the behavioral expressions of other persons as making claims on us—as demanding that we react in an appropriate way. We may indeed be capable in a cognitive sense of perceiving the full spectrum of human expressions, but we lack, so to speak, the feeling of connection that would be necessary for us to be affected by the expressions we perceive.¹⁸

Beyond this, however, if recognition is to have the kind of ontological priority Honneth assigns to it, it must also mean that we always already recognize others as specific kinds of beings that affect us in a way that is distinguished from other kinds of beings that affect us only derivatively and so, differently. Further, this primordial act of recognition is so basic that even reification does not fully manage to erase it. It is in this sense that Honneth writes that under reification,

[cognition] has freed itself of the knowledge of this dependency and deludes itself that it has become autonomous of all non-epistemic prerequisites. By furthering Lukács' intention at a higher level, this kind of 'forgetfulness of recognition' can now be termed reification.' I thereby mean to indicate the process by which we lose the consciousness of the degree to which we owe our knowledge and cognition of other persons to an antecedent stance of empathetic engagement and recognition.¹⁹

Again, we notice that because recognition for Honneth works at the most basic ontological level, it cannot completely be eliminated. Even the amnesia that Honneth is referring to as reification cannot be a total one.

IV. Criticisms: Is There a Moral Core to Elementary Recognition?

¹⁸ Honneth, "Reification and Recognition," 57.

¹⁹ Honneth, "Reification and Recognition," 56.

Having sketched out Honneth's remarks on elementary recognition and reification, and having pointed to the shift of emphasis that occurs in the essay towards the primacy of intersubjective recognition, I now want to briefly consider the main point of contention between Honneth and his critics. Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss, and Jonathan Lear, all similarly ask in their responses to Honneth's account of recognition whether a moral element is necessary to push someone cognizant of an original empathetic involvement into a positive moral relationship with the other. Butler, Geuss, and Lear all believe that Honneth is trying to explore through the development of the concept of primordial recognition precisely this sort of normative core. This leads us into a tangle of questions: Does Honneth intend to make elementary recognition into a concept with a positive moral force? If not, why do all three of his commentators read him wrong on this point? Lastly, if in the end Honneth agrees with his critics that recognition is not meant to entail any necessary normative imperatives, is his assertion convincing? In other words, is it plausible that Honneth can hang on to the concept of recognition in the way he constructs it while simultaneously claiming that it is fundamentally non-normative?

The first question can be readily resolved with a remark where Honneth disavows a positive normative implication to this account of recognition:

In the context of my theory of recognition, the form of recognition dealt with in these lectures is only intended as a necessary prerequisite of all human communication, one which consists in experiencing the other in a way that is not connected with normative implications or even positive attitudes.²⁰

With the exception of this question then, none of the issues above seem at first to be very easy to resolve. However, in the next section I wish to develop a thesis that may help elucidate some of these difficulties. This thesis will put into question a fundamental

²⁰ Honneth, "Rejoinder," 148.

premise that Butler, Lear, and Geuss leave unquestioned, namely, whether Honneth's ontological picture of recognition is correct. If the dynamics of Honneth's account of ontological intersubjective recognition are questionable, then it will put the rest of his formulation of reification and the meaning of genuine praxis as he construes it further in doubt.

V. Honneth's Pure Ontology of Recognition

Before more closely interrogating Honneth's picture of primordial recognition, I would like to clarify briefly which elements of his formulation so far I do not wish to reject. Honneth rightly claims, I believe, following Heidegger and Dewey, that our acts of cognition are premised on a pervasive background familiarity with the world and its. Moreover, I agree that it is an affective orientation that plays a crucial role in this involvement. Thus, these two notions rightly have a place in the ontology of the kind of being we are. However, below I want to raise doubts about the way in which Honneth privileges and universalizes the elementary form of recognition of the other. The problem is as follows: by claiming as part of his philosophical anthropology that we always anticipate and recognized others, even under reification, as unique kinds of beings, Honneth suggests that intersubjective recognition is *not* at bottom bound and shaped by particular and contingent kinds of cultural and ethical norm; something I think is unlikely. Honneth writes:

...we can see that the recognitional stance at issue here represents a wholly elementary form of intersubjective activity, but one that does not yet imply the perception of the *specific* value of another person. The stance that Heidegger names 'care' (*Sorge*) or 'solicitude' (*Fursorge*) and which Dewey names 'involvement' lies below the threshold at which that particular form of mutual

recognition takes place in which another person's specific characteristics are affirmed.²¹

Here, Honneth claims that that recognition amounts to a certain kind of affective stance we take *prior* to accounting for the particular characteristics of the other and *prior* to relating to them in a specific way. Nevertheless, the gesture still assumes that we take a certain sort of affective stance towards the other as a certain kind of being, specifically as a human being and, therefore, we take them as a kind of being already importantly differentiated from other kinds of beings. This, Honneth appears to imply, happens at the ontological level prior to our modified relation to various more specific characteristics or features of the other person. We must take care to remember that Honneth does not mean for the word "affirmation" here to be taken in a strongly normative sense, but rather, as an affectively receptive stance we take towards the other. Thus, for example, my recognition of the classmate sitting next to me is in the first instance an empathetic stance that prepares the way for my being engagement with her in a further communicative manner. In other words, my orientation toward her is already as a kind of being capable meeting me in a discursive encounter. For instance, I might hate her, or be indifferent to her, but I already "understand" her as a specific kind of being for whom these stances are appropriate.

If this were simply the case, then the account would be plausible enough, but we should take further note that an additional premise also slips into Honneth's account of recognition—namely, that we have delineated and recognized in advance the other as a unique kind of being, different from other kinds of beings, in *every* instance; thus, our affective orientation towards the other is always already a unique response to a kind of

²¹ Honneth, "Reification and Recognition," 51.

being like the one that we take ourselves to be. With this, Honneth seems to imply that even though we have not affirmed any specific aspect of the person and taken a stand and related to them in their particularity, we have in any case already recognized them as persons. This interpretation, one that states that what is recognized in the other in advance is already some kind of personhood, is reinforced if we take into consideration the following passage where Honneth, discussing Cavell, writes that “this antecedent act of recognition must be conceived as an ‘exhibiting of the object of knowledge’; this conversely means that if we are not conscious of this original experience of direct engagement, we don’t even really know what we are dealing with when we interact with other persons.”²² Honneth, in this passage, is trying to illuminate the meaning of reification, which is what he means by the “loss of consciousness.” But, this sort of “forgetting” can only be premised in this way if recognition always already happens as “the original experience of engagement,” where on some level we have already been moved into an affective stance specific to our relation with others. For this reason, Honneth writes:

What occurs in this type of recognition, what makes up its particular character, is that we take up a stance toward the other that reaches into the affective sphere, a stance in which we can recognize in another person the other of our own self, *our fellow human*.²³ (my emphasis)

Again, this for Honneth does not yet mean that one has responded and “modified” oneself to the particularity of the unique person before one. For example, this means that at this stage, one may have not yet responded specifically to the person before one as a lover or a friend, but it does mean that one’s recognition of the other self is the ontological basis

²² Honneth, “Reification and Recognition,” 57.

²³ Honneth, “Rejoinder,” 151.

for this further “modified” response. Thus, it entails a universal granting of some kind of selfhood to the other.

I have just claimed two important things about Honneth’s account of intersubjective recognition: First, that according to his understanding, the other is outlined for one in advance as a specific kind of being whose ontological character contains a “personhood,” which simultaneously causes one to take a certain kind of affectively receptive stance. Second, I claimed that Honneth believes we at the ontological level we “correctly” recognize the other in this way in *every* instance. That is, even under reification we have not eliminated the originary ontological act of recognition, but merely “forgotten” it, which in itself supports the idea that it is always already happening at the most basic ontological level. Honneth, then, attempts to construct a thin philosophical anthropology that describes the way in which we are receptive to one another as human beings. Evidence, that recognition is granted to the other universally is supported by the following passage:

Reification annuls the form of elementary recognition that ensures that we existentially experience other humans as the other of our self. This kind of recognition means that whether we like it or not, we pre-predicatively concede the other a self relationship-to-self, which, like our own relationship-to-self, is affectively directed toward the realization of personal goals.²⁴

In other words, our recognition of the other disposes us to be receptive affectively in a specific kind of way. Reification bleaches out to some degree our consciousness of this kind of receptiveness, which nevertheless is always present. However, this also must mean that for Honneth this kind of recognition occurs independently and before any individual characteristics of someone’s specific personhood have been conceded or interpreted. Further, if recognition is truly as universal as I am suggesting Honneth

²⁴ Honneth, “Rejoinder,” 154.

appears to believe it is, it must mean that it comes prior to any specific cultural understanding of what personhood is. Recognition in this sense, then, has the status of the condition of the possibility of linguistic intelligibility. This move is of central importance so it is worth quoting Honneth at length on this point:

...as mentioned above, this stance itself has no normative orientation. Although it compels us to take up some sort of position, it does not determine the direction or the tone of that position. Love and hate, ambivalence and coldness, can all be expressions of this elementary recognition as long as they can be seen to be modes of existential affectedness. Therefore, this type of recognition is still far from the threshold beyond which we can speak at all of norms and principles of reciprocal recognition. Normatively substantial forms of recognition...represent instead various manners in which elementary recognition gets ‘filled out’ historically. Without the experience that other individuals are fellow humans, we would be incapable of equipping this schemata with moral values that guide and limit our actions. Therefore, elementary recognition must be carried out, and we must feel existential sympathy for the other, before we can learn to orient ourselves toward norms of recognition that compel us to express certain specific forms of concern or benevolence...The *spontaneous, nonrational recognition of others as fellow human beings* thus forms a necessary condition for appropriating moral values in the light of which we recognize the other in a certain normative manner.²⁵ (my emphasis)

What the quotation above clearly indicates is that the recognition of the other’s humanity happens in a way that is prior to its mediation into a specific linguistic-cultural form. Otherwise, this formal part of human ontology would not be crafted in the universal fashion that Honneth suggests above passage; it would itself be susceptible to differing cultural interpretations or understandings. Crucially, Honneth says that this act of recognition is “originally granted to *every human being*.”²⁶ Conversely, this suggests that, for Honneth, the other is always experienced at the most basic level and in an

²⁵ Honneth, “Rejoinder,” 152-153.

²⁶ Honneth, “Rejoinder,” 156. Honneth uses this last phrase when discussing two forms of objectification. The first, involves a kind of “harmless” act of cognition whereby we retain an awareness of an original recognition, whereas the second, a form of reification, involves a “forgetting” of this initial recognition. The context of the discussion involves the way in which a soldier may reify the enemy during war. It is in this sense that he writes, “It seems clear that it is only in the second case that the independence of the purpose of observation can lead to a ‘forgetting’ of the elementary recognition originally granted to *every human being*.”

unmediated fashion as another self, as human being. But this kind of “pure ontology” should already raise some suspicions.

To think about why this move might be problematic, we should remember that on my previous reading of Heidegger the various beings which are amidst us in the world always already have the manner of significance they have because they have been previously understood as part of the background of intelligibility. Further, this background familiarity, in part, results from being socialized into a linguistic community and culture. Yet, here, Honneth says that the “spontaneous” and “pre-predicative” recognition of the other as a human being has an ontological priority over any specific content it receives. But, if hermeneutically we are always already projecting our prejudices on beings that receive their significance precisely within the given cultural and historical milieu in which we grow up, what justifies the idea that what gets disclosed as an other to our self, as another human being, is not at bottom bound up with what this category is taken to mean at any given historical time? In other words, why is Honneth confident that what comes to be disclosed as the “other of ourselves,” including the orientation we come to exhibit towards these kinds of beings, is not from the beginning intimately bound up with our cultural-linguistic understandings of who this other might be? Can the recognition of personhood be distinguished and separated from its particular content? In short, what is to assure us that this kind recognition of the other happens always in the first instance and ontologically “prior” to our involvement in a particular language? This perhaps leads us into an undecidable question, but precisely for this reason it casts doubt on Honneth’s ontological picture.

Again, I want clarify here that by raising these questions I do not mean to say that Heidegger and Honneth are wrong in saying that part of our elementary condition of *being-in-the-world* is also a *being-with* others (*Mitsein*). I think that they are importantly right (could we convincingly speak of a language without involving an other?). Rather, I am asking whether it is possible that by being involved within a particular language and culture we are already circumscribing those features that we take as constitutively human and whether this does not already come to affect who comes to be disclosed to us as a “fellow human being.” Can Honneth establish this kind of pure recognition beyond a doubt? Honneth strangely seems to be presuming that this category has been somehow settled in advance and correctly extended to all others—that some kind of universal grammar of our *being-in-the-world* assures us that others are disclosed “accurately” in a most fundamental way and in every instance as a person, another “human” outside of what this understanding would mean at any given time or moment. That is, whether we can confidently assert that at bottom we have affirmed the humanity of the other.

In light of these questions, does Honneth’s argument not seem already too foundationalist? Is it really possible to posit a pure ontology that describes an unmediated recognition of the other at the ontological level separable from those specific aspects and characteristics that we have come to interpret as human, or from within horizon of language and socialization? This raises a new question: is it not possible that the affirmation of the other’s humanity signals to the late-modern liberal ear a host of normative injunctions, claims, prohibitions and admonitions? Would not the project of positing the other’s personhood, even if only on the phenomenological level, already carry with it some kind of ethical call?

Indeed, one reading of Heidegger, on whom Honneth partially relies in this essay, man's relationship to being, including our familiarity with the kind of beings others are, is bound up to a particular historical horizon of disclosure.²⁷ Thus, Hubert Dreyfus, one of Heidegger's leading contemporary interpreters writes that:

One might say that a particular culture's understanding of being allows people to show up *as* something; in Homeric Greece, for example, people showed up as heroes or slaves and things as flashing up to be admired, whereas in the Middle Ages, people were understood as saints or sinners and things were creatures to be mastered and interpreted.²⁸

This horizon does not determine by necessity and in every instance the individual ways humans act towards one another; but, importantly, it lays open the field of possibilities for what, in large measure, it gets disclosed 'as' something. Along with gathering a range of behaviors that are considered appropriate on the basis of a particular understanding of being, this understanding can come to affect even our presuppositions at a most basic level; that is, even affecting what comes to be disclosed as human. Accordingly, Dreyfus writes that, "[T]he shared practices into which we are socialized provide a background understanding of what counts as things, what counts as human beings, and what it makes sense to do, on the basis of which we direct our actions toward particular things and people."²⁹

²⁷ One crucial essay where this thought is laid out is Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art." There, he writes that the work of art is a paradigmatic being that gives or refocuses a culture's understanding of being. By implication this means that the understanding of being varies historically, thus becoming a serious obstacle to the project of a foundational or fundamental ontology. In discussing a Greek temple as an example of a work of art Heidegger writes: "It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people." Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 167.

²⁸ Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Being and Power Revisited," *Foucault and Heidegger: Critical Encounters*, eds. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31.

²⁹ Dreyfus, "Being and Power Revisited," 31.

If the thesis I am advancing here is plausible, namely, that in our affective orientation towards the world we may not be predisposed in an *a priori* way to recognize all others as distinctly human and that the basis of recognition of the other cannot be separated from the kinds of understandings we receive linguistically and culturally, then the assertion that there is something in the other that we must always have already recognized as human becomes problematic. Even when this recognition involves a primordial affective orientation, the recognition still pivots on a yet unjustified premise or becomes a covert normative plea that we ought to recognize all others appropriately as human (perhaps both). It may be because of this feature of his ontological picture that Honneth's critics took him to be making some kind of moral argument. It would also account for certain moments of equivocation where Honneth's argument (despite his assertions to the contrary) appears to take on an explicitly normative tone. A telling example is when Honneth, in discussing Cavell, tries to clarify what he means by an empathetic engagement in the world, while simultaneously trying to clean up traces of a moral imperative in his account of recognition:

Thus the adjective 'positive,' as I have used it in connection with the concept of empathetic engagement (*Anteilnahme*), mustn't be understood as referring to positive, friendly emotions. The adjective instead signifies the existential fact—which certainly has implications for our affects—that *we necessarily affirm the value of another person* in the stance of recognition, even if we might curse or hate that person at a given moment. But perhaps we could go a step beyond Cavell and assert that even in cases where we recognize other persons in an emotionally negative way, *we still always have a residual intuitive sense of not having done full justice to their personalities. In such a situation, the element in our recognitional stance which we customarily call 'conscience' would be at issue.*³⁰ (my emphasis)

Has Honneth in this instance not already loaded his concept of recognition with positive normative content? What could having already recognized “the value of another person”

³⁰ Honneth, “Reification and Recognition,” 51.

mean outside of those particular values attributed to others in specific times and places? Moreover, by linking recognition in this instance with “conscience,” he cannot help but figure recognition in such a way that it moves beyond the terrain of the merely epistemic (as a condition of intersubjective intelligibility) and into the terrain of the ethical. Here he even seems to smuggle the notion that the originary act of recognition, which Honneth thinks is extended to all human beings, also entails a sense of equal respect for the kind of beings others are. Thus, having not properly related to this original act of recognition means that “conscience” and “guilt” are brought into play. Otherwise, why would treating another negatively, or in a presumably disrespectful way affect our conscience at all? The gesture might seem inconspicuous but it is nevertheless important. The way in which Honneth prefigures the recognition of the human other and inserts it in his philosophical anthropology at the level of formal ontology (as an intrinsic and *a priori* feature) helps explain why Honneth’s language might be slipping unintentionally but perhaps predictably into moral terrain.

VI. Excursus on Borges and Recognition

While Honneth does not wish to tie recognition to any specific positive moral content, he believes that we somehow already affectively recognize and acknowledge the human other. Honneth’s claims to the universality of primordial recognition seem plausible so long as he leaves the content of what comes to be recognized in the other undetermined. But, if our understanding is constituted along a historical and linguistic axis, that is, hermeneutically, then the mode in which the other is disclosed may be importantly dependent on them. In other words, Honneth seems unjustified in positing a

pure ontology of recognition without recourse to some kind of strong foundational premise, one which he nevertheless fails to provide. This possible variation in the mode of the other's disclosure, might even suggest that the status of Honneth's elementary recognition of the other as another self may itself be a consequence of a more originary ontological moment of disclosure whereby the other in a radical otherness, is not yet disclosed as another self or an already settled alterity.

I want to turn now to the opening epigraph of this essay to posit a figure that could stand for the kind of unsettled ontological character of this alterity. The figure of the golem, a being between human, animal, and thing, becomes a kind of allegory for the problem of universalizing the category of the human being and anchoring it to a foundational ontology. While the golem myth has its origins in Jewish folklore, I want to use its short but suggestive treatment by Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges to make this point.

In "The Golem," Borges writes of a Jewish legend that says that deciphering the true name of God could endow one with a power that partook of his omnipotence. The story of the golem, as Borges recounts it, has Judah Lion, the rabbi of Prague, trying to decipher this powerful name. He writes that,

Burning to know what God knew, Judah Lion gave himself up to permutations of letters and complex variations: And at length pronounced the Name which is the Key, The Portal, the Echo, the Host, the Palace, Over a doll which, with torpid hands, He wrought to teach the arcane Of Letters, Time, and Space.³¹

However, the rabbi's incantations over the being, perhaps because they were incomplete, fail to fully bring to life the essence of the human being:

There must have been some error in graphics Or in articulating the Sacred Name:

³¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Golem," *A Personal Anthology* (New York: Grove Press 1967), 77.

For despite the most bizarre wizardry The apprentice man never learned to talk.
Its eyes—less a man's than a dog's, And even less a dog's than a thing's—would
follow the rabbi throughout the equivocal Twilight of the dim unworldly retreat.³²

The golem is usually taken to be a figure of horror created by man's defiance in the face of God. I would like, however, to interpret it in our context somewhat differently. The fallible incantation can serve to represent precisely the limits of our language. Having no recourse to a final vocabulary, a language guaranteed by metaphysical foundations, we cannot say with full confidence that the other is always already acknowledged as human and that this category has been correctly settled and universally extended in advance. Further, because the understanding of being may be variable, there can be no certainty that the category itself might not emerge fundamentally from a moment in our disclosure of being where it is neither fully settled or unsettled. Because of this, we may not be able to confidently claim that at the ontological level we have always already in some sense affirmed the other's humanity:

Raising its filial hands to God It copied the devotions of its god Or, stupefied and smirking, it would bend
Into the concave salaams of the orient. The rabbi gazed fondly on his creature
And with some terror.³³

What Borges writes of the golem, we might also say of the other: when confronted by the other we might be experiencing them at bottom not as surely human but perhaps also as "simulacrum." That is, how can we be sure that our relation to the other is always primordially genuine? In part, it is because of this that I wish to question whether it makes sense to think of recognition and reification as merely a dynamic involving an originary and more foundational act (recognition) and its subsequent forgetting in consciousness (reification).

³² Borges, "The Golem," 78.

³³ Borges, "The Golem," 78.

VII. Conclusion: Of Social Pathology and the Status of Genuine Praxis

As a conclusion to this essay, let me briefly try to place Honneth's remarks on reification into the wider context of the field of social philosophy. This will also bring us back in touch with the issues of genuine praxis and the diagnosis of social pathology. From our investigation above the following question arises: If recognition of the other may be limited by our linguistic constitution and cannot be universally assured, what then becomes the meaning of social pathology and genuine praxis? As we saw, Honneth thinks that, for the most part, if free from reification, we would exhibit genuine praxis as a "correct" basic orientation toward the other as another person, another self. For him, reification is a distortion of this originary condition and thus constitutes a kind of pathology, a deviation from the normal practice of originary recognition.

In addition to this, we saw that since Honneth retains the notion that the originary recognition of the other is always already in operation, reification amounts to the "forgetting" of this fact. In other words, it is a kind of obscuring in consciousness of the fact that originary recognition and its "empathetic involvement" is always active.³⁴ In order to call this kind of reification a pathology, however, Honneth goes on to imply that we are normally consciously aware of the significance of our basic affective involvement with others and that, moreover, by being so, we normally orient themselves appropriately towards all other human beings as human beings. Again, it seems that for him, a praxis free of reification amounts to a genuine praxis. As I see it, there are two basic problems with this claim. First, if at the ontological level our affective orientation toward the other as another person cannot always be assured, then it means that we cannot have

³⁴ See above page 12.

confidence in the claim that free of reification we come to genuinely recognize all others genuinely and in an *a priori* fashion. Second, it is difficult to say that most of the time we are actually conscious of the way in which the other, when recognized, affects us in such a way. As I mentioned in my preliminary considerations of this issue, we might want to say that bringing this ontological phenomenon (of a kind of pre-conscious affective relationship with the other) to consciousness may require a stronger mode of attunement that somehow “transcends” our everyday coping and allows us to be existentially engaged in a more meaningful sense.

Based on this, it is possible to conclude that the way Honneth builds his picture of the reification-recognition binary may be deficient. I want now to tentatively sketch out what an alternative ontology might need to look like. For this purpose it might be useful to distinguish different kinds of modes of involvement in the world. Thus, the new picture would include: (1) a basic and pre-conscious affective receptiveness and involvement with beings in general (associated with the mode of everyday coping), (2) genuine praxis or pathological praxis as rooted in this basic involvement, but whose criteria is developed according to a set of relevant moral values or a “thicker” set of evaluative criteria.

Above, I remained skeptical of the claim that the empathetic acknowledgment of others as human beings was somehow free of its particular cultural-linguistic content and whether it was always already being extended universally and in an appropriate manner to the other. However, I also acknowledged that a holistic everyday coping was an important part of what it meant to be a *being-in-the-world*. I claimed that it is this holistic involvement with the meaning and significance of beings that we could say is in a general

way most basic to the kind of beings that we are. However, because this affective opening to the world and the beings in it is so essential and pervasive, it would be difficult to imagine that it is always actively present in our consciousness. Thus, it would be incoherent to speak of a concept of reification in this case that would apply to it. Further, while most of the time we could be said to exhibit a form of coping, it would doubtlessly prove too general to be the content of a genuine praxis in any meaningful sense. Thus, our holistic dealings through an affective involvement and familiarity with the world is so pervasive and fundamental that it would be hard to make sense of what pathological or genuine praxis would be based on it alone.

Importantly, this means that the qualification of praxis as genuine or pathological already relies on a further interpretive development beyond the basic ontological condition. Further, this description also brings in the question of whether we can say that our orientation toward the other is “appropriate” outside of a constellation of normative concepts and values available within a particular historical horizon. The idea of genuine praxis against which to delineate possible pathologies may need to be developed and supported by those values and norms that we wish to affirm, for instance, as democratic citizens in late-modernity. Therefore, it seems hard to incorporate genuine praxis or pathology into a kind of thin or bare philosophical anthropology in the way Honneth tries to do in this essay. Again, the concepts of genuine praxis and pathological social praxis would have to gain their meaning and content in light of broader moral and ethical concerns. In an essay entitled “Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy,” Honneth admits that one of the most compelling routes open to making social philosophy relevant is by developing its concepts (such as the meaning of a social

pathology) along the lines of those values that animate a society's moral and ethical thinking.³⁵ According to him, one alternative available to the social philosopher is to work within the parameters of these values to construct notions of social pathology. In other words, these values would be the standard of evaluation, acknowledging their contingent origins and giving up claim to transcendental validity (for example, in the case of a pure ontology of recognition). Thus, this kind of thinking "can only be applied to a historical epoch whose presuppositions it takes over."³⁶ Honneth in his work on reification and recognition appears to be at odds with this insight.

³⁵ Axel Honneth, "Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy," *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 42. In this essay, Honneth looks at the various paths available for refiguring the meaning and value of social philosophy. Among the alternative methodological paths available to contemporary social philosophy to achieve its goals, Honneth includes the development of a thin philosophical anthropology. However, it becomes evident that based on the problems delineated above, this path seems unconvincing for a reconception of reification as social pathology.

³⁶ Honneth, "Pathologies of the Social," 42.