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## **The metaethics of critical theories**

Titus Stahl

### **I. Introduction**

Critical theories have traditionally had an ambivalent relationship to metaethical questions. One of the few claims that all critical theorists agree upon, beginning with Marx and extending to the later generations of the Frankfurt School, is that their critical analysis of society is not a form of “applied ethics”. In other words, such theorists do not first philosophically justify moral principles which are valid everywhere and at all times and then, in a second step, apply such principles to concrete circumstances. As far as they make normative claims about what is wrong with society, these claims are not justified by appealing to an independent moral theory. In contrast to contemporary liberalism, critical theories are instead engaged in “immanent critique” (Stahl 2013a). That is, they do not depart from philosophical principles or moral intuitions but from normative expectations endorsed by empirically existing social contradictions or social movements and, therefore, they believe that they do not need independent moral premises.

At least for Marx and the first generation of the Frankfurt School, this methodological choice is based on the belief that moral standards not only are an *insufficient basis* for the relevant kind of critique, but that the *very existence of a moral domain* in social practice and philosophical discourse is a symptom of something that is wrong with current societies. First, they assume that societies form a totality, that is, a whole in which everything is only fully comprehensible if one understands its function within this whole. The conceptual structures that govern our thinking are part of this social whole and do not remain unaffected when the social totality is one of domination. Any form of thinking, including moral thinking, will mirror the oppressive structure of society and thus will in some sense be defective. Second they agree that we cannot simply use moral standards to evaluate society if we understand morality as part of a social totality. If moral standards are shaped by society, they do not provide an appropriate point of departure for critique. Although later critical

theorists such as Habermas and Honneth reject the idea of society as a totality and consequently also the negative view of morality that results from it, they still subscribe to a more modest version of the same claim: Because they continue to see the very existence of the domain of the moral as a result of the historical evolution of social practices, they also tend to offer analyses of morality in terms of a more basic social theory, rather than themselves engaging in moral theorizing.

Consequently, critical theories often take up an external perspective towards moral discourse, treating its existence as a social fact to which their insights could be applied rather than using moral claims to make their normative arguments. Of course, this does not preclude theorizing about the meaning of moral language or the structure of moral motivation (although, other than Habermas, critical theorists have rarely engaged in such projects systematically). But an external perspective on morality that does not *engage in* moral discourse, but instead merely *describes* its function, at least need not consider the metaphysical worries about moral properties and moral facts very pressing that are at the center of contemporary analytic debates about metaethics.

It is not completely clear, however, that this rejection of morality is consistent with the evaluative stance of critical theory. Critical theorists by no means remain normatively neutral about society: they provide normative arguments for social change that, at least on the surface, look very much like moral arguments (Finlayson 2009, 15). This leads to two questions: First, can critical theorists make plausible that the normative considerations they advance to criticize society are not moral considerations? And what understanding of “morality” is presupposed when they make that claim? Second, if critical theories make normative claims, can they draw on a metaethical theory (even if it does not concern moral judgments in a narrow sense) that can help us to understand how these claims can form the basis of a radical critique of society while still being compatible with the idea that all forms of normative discourse are part of a social totality that might be substantially deformed by oppression and domination?

While the claim concerning the embedding of normative discourse in a social totality suggests to many some form of moral relativism, the aspiration of critical theories to transcending moral

critique seems to necessitate a commitment to some kind of objectivity in the moral domain that is impossible to square with such an understanding. In order to more make sense of the relationship between critical theories and morality, this chapter will take a close look at the metaethical commitments of the major critical theorists (Marx, Adorno, Habermas and Honneth) in the light of their explicit discussions of morality, in order to find out whether we can make sense of the claim that critical theories develop a fundamental normative, but non-moral critique of society.

## **II. Marx: Social Practice Expressivism**

Many of Marx's interpreters have struggled with his seemingly paradoxical attitude towards morality (Wood 1981; Shaw 1981; Lukes 1985; Peffer 1990): On the one hand, Marx denounces capitalism using a rhetoric that can hardly be described as anything but moral. On the other hand, Marx is not only famously dismissive of *moralism* (Nielsen 1989, 117)– that is, towards forms of social critique that take moral proselytizing as their most important task – but also towards *morality* itself (Rosen 2000). On his version of the totality claim, he frequently characterizes morality as a mere epiphenomenon of social life, as part of the ideological “superstructure” of society, as a form of ideology, as a mere expression of particular class interests and as something that presents a distorted view of reality (Marx and Engels 1976b, 36; Marx and Engels 1976a, 477,504). Such remarks suggest that Marx did not think that moral beliefs could reflect valid practical reasons. But if truly *all moral beliefs* are ideological in this sense, Marx should have also accepted that *his own* moral beliefs do not reflect valid reasons. And this seems implausible.

As a response to this dilemma, it has been widely suggested that Marx merely offers a *sociological* hypothesis when he talks about morality as an ideology, to the effect that morality tends to reflect particular interests of particular classes (Nielsen 1989, 37,109,122). Of course, Marx's story about the causal origins of morality is likely to raise suspicions about the idea that moral beliefs straightforwardly reflect some independent reality. Nevertheless, such causal claims do not rule out the possibility that at least *some* moral beliefs – and, in particular, beliefs in moral platitudes such as

“causing unnecessary pain ought to be avoided” – reflect moral facts (Nielsen 1989, 35). Thus, as a mere sociologist of morality, Marx need not have been committed to immoralism on a metaethical level.

The defenders of the immoralist interpretation, however, cannot be satisfied with this response. This is because Marx not only makes the trivial claim that moral beliefs can be sociologically explained, he also claims that the *very idea* of morality is in some sense mistaken. In the *German Ideology*, Marx suggests that defenders of morality must be committed to the idea that moral principles can be justified without reference to any actual or potential social practice (Marx and Engels 1976b, 419–20).<sup>1</sup> This idea is precisely what he thinks is the essence of ideological thought (Marx and Engels 1976b, 30). An ideological belief is thus a belief that purports to be more than an expression of the historical reality of human beings.

To better understand the relation between this critique of morality and Marx's normative pronouncements, it is worth examining Marx's theory regarding its metaethical commitments. One potential misunderstanding in this context, however, must be avoided from the beginning: many authors who defend an interpretation of Marx as a moral thinker take a *moral relativist* reading of Marx as the primary alternative to such an interpretation (Shaw 1981, 23ff; Nielsen 1989, 37; Peffer 1990, 269ff). Such a relativist interpretation would ascribe to Marx the belief that every moral statement (such as “one ought to always respect other people's property”) is only true for some societies but not for others (Fisk 1980). However, not only is there little evidence that Marx entertained any relativist ideas, but it also does not follow from his characterization of morality as an ideology. On a relativist reading, the only thing that would be false or defective about ordinary moral beliefs would be the implied claim that such beliefs reflect judgments that have absolute validity. Once people understand that their moral judgments are not valid absolutely, but only in relation to their society, a relativist ought to describe their moral beliefs as appropriate. Clearly this is not an idea that Marx would have held.

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<sup>1</sup> There have been several attempts to distinguish morality from broader normative concerns in Marx using other criteria (Miller 1984, 16; Wood 1981, 128), but this seems to be clearly what Marx finds most objectionable about morality.

There are two alternative metaethical options that fit better with what Marx actually says: the error-theory and anti-realist expressivism. Put briefly, the error theory, claims that it is part of the meaning of moral vocabulary that one uses such vocabulary to express beliefs about moral facts that entail an 'unconditional ought' (Mackie 1990, 29). However, according to the error theorist, there are no such facts. Thus, all positive moral claims are false. If we similarly take the meaning of moral judgments to be partly constituted by the fact that they aim to refer to moral facts that are independent of any social context, then it is likely that such an error theory is something that Marx would have endorsed. Such an interpretation hides, however, the complexity of his position towards morality. He certainly did not believe that moral judgments are simply untrue.

The overall spirit of Marx's treatment of morality is more consistent with a version of expressivism that focuses not on individual statements but on forms of discourse. Expressivists in metaethics hold that the function of moral language is not primarily to describe facts but rather to express feelings, attitudes or commitments (Blackburn 1984). While metaethical expressivists in contemporary analytic philosophy assume that moral judgments express the mental state of the speaker (such as the acceptance of a rule), Marx, following Hegel in this respect, is not concerned with individual linguistic utterances. He rather focuses on the way in which the *structure of the dominant social practices of a society* finds expression in its (moral) *forms of thinking*. When Marx talks about right and morality as ideologies, he draws attention to the *structural similarity* between forms of thought and actual social reality – for example, he argues that bourgeois right with its emphasis on individual interests mirrors the individualism of actual social life under capitalism. While he also often describes causal connections, the argument (most notably in the *German Ideology*) is that the forms of thought that are dominant in the self-understanding of any given society are *nothing more than an expression of the dominant forms of social interaction in that society* (Marx and Engels 1976b, 31, 36).

The following idea might be helpful to make sense of this point: any social practice that human beings collaboratively engage in must be guided by some concerns or goals that allow for

*distinctions* between different kinds of objects and actions and between different outcomes (Taylor 1985, 33–4; Rosen 2000). These *practical* distinctions find their expression in *conceptual* distinctions that people use when attempting to make sense of their practices. Marx seems to claim that the descriptive and normative concepts dominant in the self-understanding of a given society always express distinctions that have a role in the wider practical contexts of that society. Marx tells us in *The German Ideology* that language playing such an expressive role is unavoidable (Marx and Engels 1976b, 36, 44). Thus, language and thinking are not, already as such, “ideological”. The concept of ideology only applies to forms of thinking that *deceive about* their expressive relationship to practices. In this sense, a term like “morally right” can become ideological once people interpret it to refer to practice-independent standards, rather than to express a practice-dependent distinction between different kinds of acts.

How can we explain the existence of this kind of ideological deception? Marx assumes that, as a result of the historical development of the division of labor, the intellectual functions of planning and conceptualizing become increasingly divorced from physical labor (Marx and Engels 1976b, 40). This need not be problematic as long as it is understood by all participants in any cooperative context that intellectual activities are to be understood as a part of the broader process of cooperative labor. Historically, however, the division of intellectual and manual labor has always led to forms of class domination that then presented themselves as something “natural”. Marx claims that in all class societies, the rules of discourse tend to mirror this feature of domination. In particular, the foundations of authority tend to be understood in a way that makes it seem as if the domination of a social elite over the labor process of subordinated classes stems from a source independent of it. The use of concepts, ideals or “ideas” that can be used to express and legitimize authority (“duty”, “truth”, etc.) become governed by rules that no longer allow speakers to treat these concepts as a mere expression of concerns bound to cooperative practices (Stahl 2013b). Instead, according to the rules of the discursive game of ideology, one must treat such concepts as practice-independent and thus eternally valid.



This allows us to see why Marx need not have a problem with *normative* judgments while rejecting *moral* judgments. On this model, normative judgments can be understood as an expression of an individual's attitude towards a practical question that is only intelligible as part of a wider context of cooperative activity in which certain norms and goals are presupposed. Such judgments, furthermore, also express an *endorsement* of those norms and goals and of the rules that regulate the use of the normative concepts used in the judgment. *Moral discourse* is governed, in contrast, by rules that *prohibit* treating moral distinctions as bound to practical concerns. These rules thus mirror an underlying structure of domination. By using moral concepts, one not only takes up a normative stance towards a specific practical question but one also implicitly endorses rules that systematically distort or mislead about the true nature of the very concepts that one uses. On this account, it is clear that Marx did not think of moral claims as straightforwardly false in a descriptive sense but as false in the sense that one cannot make them without endorsing a deceptive understanding of the relation between language and society.

We can best understand Marx's rejection of morality, I have argued, if we take him to subscribe to a practice-expressivist theory of normative judgment. It is important to note that such an expressivist view does not entail relativism or subjectivism as many contemporary expressivists argue (Blackburn 1999): One can reasonably express one's commitment to the idea that some practical question within a social practice should be answered in a certain way (e.g. that workers should be given the full results of their labor), without being committed to the idea that other people's differing commitments are equally valid, as long as one is also committed to also *disapproving* of those commitments and all the reasons that lead to them. One can even make sense of the idea of *universal and objective commitments* in expressivist terms if one assumes that by using that language, one commits oneself to the belief that any acceptable social practice will pose certain questions and if one endorses only one (and always the same) acceptable answer to these questions. None of this requires one to "moralize" in the sense that one has to believe or to advertise one's practical judgment to reflect practice-independent facts.

It must be admitted, finally, that the definition of morality that is presupposed in Marx's argument is implausibly narrow. It is completely compatible with Marx's view to say that equality, human dignity and self-realization are fundamental moral goods in a wider sense, as long as one concedes that the meaning of such terms can only be correctly understood when we acknowledge that human dignity, equality and self-realization are important because they answer to distinctive problems within human practices and that their import must therefore always be accounted for in terms of such practices.

## **II. Adorno: Negativist Expressivism**

While the first generation of the Frankfurt School to some degree subscribes to and further develops Marx's idea that *forms of thought* are expressions of *forms of social cooperation*, there is very little evidence on exactly how this relates to Marx's critique of morality. In the case of Adorno, it is rather clear that he never pretends *not* to make moral judgments. Most famously, he argues in *Negative Dialectics* that a “new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.” (Adorno 1973, 365) He even sometimes seems to suggest that we can perceive the ethical import of certain situations directly, especially in cases of human suffering and thus non-inferentially acquire knowledge about what we ought to do if we want to live an ethical life (O'Connor 2013, 139).

Such clearly moral claims stand in tension with other remarks he makes. For instance, he suggests – like Marx, but for different reasons – that the *very project* of morality is problematic. As he states in a famous passage from *Minima Moralia*, “wrong life cannot be lived rightly.” (Adorno 2006, 39) Under the conditions of late capitalism or even totalitarianism, there is simply no way to live one's life in an ethically correct way. Thus, any individual attempt to extricate oneself from such practices must fail. This also means that any philosophical attempt to formulate moral principles has to operate under the (false) assumption that individuals are in charge of their lives. Of course, this

rejection of *moralizing* – that is often called “ethical negativism” (Jaeggi 2005, 72) – does not entail that one must reject the idea of morality. On the contrary, it seems as if the claim that moral action is impossible under current conditions requires one to be able to distinguish the morally right from the morally wrong and thus requires some form of moral knowledge (Freyenhagen 2013, 209ff). But Adorno holds that morality is not only practically pointless, he also claims that we are systematically unable to determine what the morally right alternative could be. This is because moral philosophy embraces a form of thinking – what Adorno calls “the identifying mode of thinking” (Adorno 1973, 147) – that plays an essential role for the permanence of oppression in modernity.

According to Adorno, identity thinking is a way of understanding the relation between the *concepts* that human beings have to inevitably use and the particular objects, persons or situations that they attempt to grasp by using such concepts. It is characterized by the implicit assumption that we can understand everything important or essential about the world (including ourselves) by coming to a conceptual understanding of its phenomena, or, in other words, by *subsuming* any given phenomenon under some concept (O’Connor 2004, 18). This is problematic because it denies that there could be anything about a given phenomenon that exceeds the grasp of the relevant concepts. Identity thinking is more than an accidental mistake that we could avoid by endorsing the right theory about concepts. It rather results from a more encompassing historical dynamic. Adorno traces the origins of conceptual thinking back to the attempt to control nature. Human control over nature always involves the attempt to bring the potentially overwhelming experience of nature under control by subsuming it under concepts. By constructing conceptual schemes that enable deductive inferences that allow for systematic technical control of the world, we can discover true generalizations about natural phenomena that allow us to efficiently deal with particular situations. This development enables a process of technical and social rationalization of human engagement with the world, leading to progressive increase of technical control over nature (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). The precondition for such rationalization is, however, the dominance of a system of

abstract concepts in human thinking that grows more and more encompassing. Adorno's crucial argument is that this process is simultaneously one of liberation and domination: Increased control over inner and outer nature indeed enables human beings to autonomously structure their lives. But the negation of the possibility that conceptual thinking might never completely capture its object also leads to a gradual impoverishment of human experience. Moreover, the way in which the social project of establishing human control over nature in fact plays out does not lead towards social liberation. It involves a social organization of labor power that requires individuals to subject themselves to always larger systems of social control. This link between conceptual domination of nature, psychological repression of inner nature and social domination represents a more radical version of the totality thesis. In contrast to Marx, Adorno does not think of social domination as a deformation of an otherwise neutral cooperative activity, but as part and parcel of a way of relation to the world that is oppressive through and through.

However, he does not take this as an occasion to dismiss conceptual thinking *per se* – rather he contrasts identity thinking (conceptual thinking that is unaware of its distorting character) with “thinking in constellations”, i.e., a form of thinking that acknowledges that every conceptualization fails to do justice to its object and instead approaches approaching any phenomenon with a multiplicity of interrelated concepts, each of which is applied with the conscious awareness of it as not being fully adequate (Adorno 1973, 162; O’Connor 2013, 17).

This critique of identity thinking is also central to Adorno's theory of morality. He takes Kant – namely this means Kantian *constructivism* – to be the most promising option for moral philosophy. The reason for this is that Adorno follows the Kantian and Hegelian tradition in rejecting the possibility of any immediate relation between subject and object that is not mediated by concepts, that is, any idea of a “given” in Sellars's sense, or, as Adorno would have put it, any idea of “immediacy”. In the moral case, Adorno cannot seriously consider the possibility of non-inferential knowledge of “moral facts” in the sense in which such knowledge is often postulated by moral realists (Adorno 2002, 110; Bernstein 2001, 245; Jaeggi 2005, 73).

That does not mean, however, that he has to accept the picture of normativity that constructivists presuppose (O'Connor 2013, 152). Constructivism is committed to the claim that we can only act morally if we follow correct moral principles. Even though moral agents need not necessarily apply such principles consciously, a complete understanding of morality nevertheless requires knowledge about such principles and has to make use of the correct conceptual framework. If the relevant framework indeed is correct, it captures everything that morally relevant about any given situation. It is clear that, on such a description, constructivism commits the mistake of identity thinking.

But if Adorno rejects both constructivism and non-constructivist realism, it is no longer clear that there is *any* metaethical view that could satisfy the desiderata of Adorno's theory. Of course, in principle, Adorno could endorse a form of the error theory by advocating for an anti-particularist, "generalist" claim on the level of semantics (all moral judgments express beliefs in the correctness of moral principles) and a particularist claim on the substantive level (no moral principle is correct). However, on such a theory, it would be inconsistent to claim that we can make true moral judgments about the badness of acts or situations (Freyenhagen 2013, 7). Thus, an error theory would undermine his ethical negativism.

But just as in Marx's case, there is a way out of this apparent inconsistency that emerges once Adorno's reasons for rejecting moral philosophy become fully clear: Adorno's characterization of morality assumes that we have to understand judgments that involve moral categories (such as "torturing innocents is unjust") as judgments that not only express the subject's evaluation of a situation, but also as expressing a second-order commitment to the idea that the normative significance of the situation is exhausted by the fact that it is described in this way. Such a second-order commitment is, however, clearly not involved in the particular, negative ethical judgments that Adorno himself endorses. For instance, the judgment that the torture of prisoners should stop does not commit one to the view that the reasons for why it should stop can be spelled out using general principles. As a negative judgment, it need not refer to any procedure of determining reasons (Freyenhagen 2013, 203). It rather reflects an attitude of rejection towards any principle that

would allow for the torture of prisoners.

However, it must be noted that this still does not mean that Adorno wants to endorse a model of the non-inferential perception of reasons as the source of authoritative moral claims or to treat such reasons as normative “givens.” Non-inferentially arrived-at claims concerning the wrongness of particular situations can still be discursively defended and justified by mobilizing different conceptual descriptions and bringing them into “constellations”, without taking any conceptual description as essential, primary or exhaustive. In contrast to moral particularists, Adorno believes that the vindication of non-inferential negative judgments is only possible in terms of general, universal concepts. In contrast to “generalist” moral constructivists, Adorno does not think that general principles are the source of moral normativity, at least not in the situation of late capitalism. Because all concepts, according to Adorno, must be understood as rules that shape our access to the relevant domain, I would like to suggest, again, that we can read Adorno as embracing a certain expressivist notion of moral discourse – however, with the addition of an important realist component (Stahl forthcoming). While Marx assumes that we should reject the self-understanding of traditional morality based on an insight into the relation between practice and morality, Adorno assumes that the negation of identity thinking has to stem from the philosophical (and thus conceptual) insight into the deficiency of identity thinking in conjunction with an openness to the deliverances of non-inferential moral perception. For this reason, one could call Adorno an expressivist that also endorses a negative realism about morality.

### **Habermas: A Socialized Constructivism**

Habermas's perspective on morality differs in two crucial respects from both Marx and Adorno. First, Habermas does not share their skepticism towards modern morality but instead is deeply committed to the emancipatory potential of modern morality. Second, Habermas engages with metaethical questions to a much larger degree than any other figure in critical theory. In his writings on discourse ethics, he commits himself to a cognitivist-constructivist view of morality that seems

incompatible with the broadly expressivist commitments of Marx and Adorno that I have sketched so far (Habermas 1990, 57). But as I will argue, the disagreement might be less deep than it seems. In particular, if one reconstructs the precise contours of his constructivist project, one finds Habermas struggling with the same problems regarding the relationship between social practice and moral principles that we find in Marx and Adorno. Although this is not intended to downplay that obvious and significant differences in approach, it might make sense to read even Habermas' work as a part of this tradition.

The metaethical basis of discourse ethics is to be found in Habermas's theory of communication. Put briefly, Habermas claims that, within the broader practical context of human linguistic interaction, there is a specific practice of *communicative action* which is characterized by the willingness of participants to coordinate their actions by reaching understanding through the exchange of speech acts. The relevant kinds of speech acts are those that raise *validity claims*. Any given speech act potentially raises validity claims regarding its truth, its rightness, and its expressive sincerity (Habermas 1984, I:20ff). In genuinely communicative interaction, it is only the *acceptability* of validity claims that structures the interaction, rather than threats or violence (Habermas 1984, I:295). Such interaction, however, is not just one possible form of interaction amongst others. According to Habermas, all other forms of linguistically mediated interaction – such as strategic interaction – depend on an understanding of speech acts that always implies at least the counterfactual possibility of communicative interaction (Habermas 1984, I:288).

This leads to the following analysis of the moral domain: if we want to know anything about the meaning of moral statements, we should not focus on their strategic or otherwise insincere use but on their communicative employment. That is, we should ask what kind of validity claim they raise and how such a validity claim can be justified. In contrast to non-cognitivists, Habermas insists on taking the claim-like surface structure of moral utterances seriously (Rehg 2011, 119). In contrast to *realist* cognitivists, however, Habermas does not think that moral judgments can be true in a sense that is discourse-transcending (Finlayson 2005). But they can be *intersubjectively acceptable* which

still allows for objectivity in the sense of them being valid independent of any particular speaker's judgment. In particular, moral judgments are part of a domain of discourse that is governed by rules that determine what counts as a valid argument in such a discourse. Habermas further develops this thought by introducing the well-known *universality* and *discourse* principles (“U” and “D”) that regulate the acceptability of normative and moral validity claims, respectively (Habermas 1990). While his precise argument for these principles is not central to the question pursued here, it is important to note that these principles presuppose a very specific definition of the domain of the moral. According to Habermas, “morality” (in contrast to ethical and pragmatic questions) is concerned with universally and unconditionally binding norms that serve the social purpose of regulating the pursuit of and securing the social respect for universal human interests (Rehg 2011, 122; Cooke 1997, 150ff). It can hardly escape notice that this describes those features of morality that Marx and Adorno took as a reason to reject it – in particular, the idea of moral discourse as having a logic that is independent of that of other practices and the idea of moral judgments as having some form of foundational justification. While this seems to put Habermas methodologically as well as substantially at odds with Marx's and Adorno's critique of morality, it is important to note that Habermas retains three features that are also distinctive for the forms of normative judgment that they want to preserve: first, the idea of a link between morality and social practice that is central to the idea of morality as part of a social whole; second, a historical account of the development of the idea of morality; and third, a place for the critique of the ideological nature of (certain) forms of morality.

Regarding to the first point, it has to be noted that Habermas agrees with the critical theory tradition that the vocabulary we use in moral discourses, and consequently the form of moral judgments, can be understood as an expression of features of an underlying practice – in this case, of a practice of communication. But in contrast to Marx and Adorno, he rejects the idea of an undifferentiated “totality” (Habermas 1984, II:339) – that is, the idea that such a practice is only one aspect of a whole of social reproduction and thus can be completely deformed by the dominating features in the



sphere of instrumental cooperation. He rather assumes that the spheres of communicative action and strategic-instrumental cooperation are subject to two intertwined, but independent logics of rationalization and that we should analyze the pathologies of modernity not as the result of one pathological process of rational domination, but rather as the encroachment of an oppressive rationalization of instrumental cooperation on the distinct sphere of communicative interaction (Habermas 1984, II:356). In regard to the second point, Habermas also endorses the claim that the existence of modern moral discourse has to be understood in terms of a historical development – not, as Marx argues, as a result of the division of labor, but as a result of a historical process of rationalization and differentiation of value spheres.

Third, even though Habermas does not think that the form of modern morality as such is ideological, in his early work he at least suggests that specific attempts at discursive legitimation can be ideological when they “do not articulate the power relationship whose institutionalization they make possible.” (Habermas 1988, 172) If moral discourse is distorted by power relations that cannot be thematized in it, it becomes ideological. While this is still in the spirit of Marx, Habermas changes his view on this matter in his later work. He then comes to believe that the process of communicative rationalization makes ideological domination infeasible. The function of ideology is taken over by the colonization of the everyday substrate of communication by systemic imperatives which leads to a fragmentation of every-day (moral) consciousness (Habermas 1984, 2:354f.).

There are two questions that remain on the metaethical level that are not entirely solved in Habermas's theory: Although he rejects non-cognitivism because he holds that moral judgments express beliefs for which justifications can be given, he still does not think moral discourse is truth-apt. It is therefore not clear that he is a cognitivist in the full sense of the term (Finlayson 2005). Of course, this does not show that Habermas would have anything to gain by moving towards an expressivist model. But one could at least imagine an expressivist reformulation of Habermasian constructivism that takes moral judgments not only as expressing the judgment that something ought to be done, but also as expressing one's commitment to second-order norms that delineate in

what ways one is open to engaging in a justificatory discourse about such commitments (for a similar suggestion, see (Brandom 2000, 372).

### **Honneth: Morality as an Expression of Social Struggles**

While Habermas has good reasons to reject an overly simplistic picture of moral discourse as a mere expression of social domination and to opt for a more complex story about social rationalization as the rationalization of discourses, his theory runs the danger of neglecting the centrality of an important insight of Marx and Adorno for a critical theory. This insight is that the *discursive form* of morality can itself be a source of social domination and that at least a specific form of moralism can function as an ideology.

It is in this context that Axel Honneth's theory of recognition plays an important role in contemporary critical theory. Honneth defends a still different picture of the "social totality". In contrast to Habermas, he does not think that social interaction is subject to two conflicting forms of rationalization. In contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer, he also does not think that society forms a completely integrated totality. Rather, he sees society as essentially fragmented and divided by social struggles in which different self-understandings of social groups compete (Honneth 1993, xviii.; Honneth 1995). Such struggles are never purely animated by strategic self-interest. Their "internal grammar" can only be properly reconstructed if one sees that social movements are always motivated by the perception of moral disrespect (Honneth 1992, 196). But Honneth does not take this sociological fact to demonstrate that the idea of morality as such is ideological – rather the opposite. For Honneth, moral expectations are irreducibly basic components of any social order. Throughout his social theoretical writings, Honneth analyzes moral claims as expressions of legitimated social expectations that are grounded in basic social norms of mutual recognition. He thereby embraces the original expressivist thesis of Marx, but not in the sense that the structure of moral discourse should be taken as an expression of the structure of instrumental cooperation. Instead, he argues that moral judgments express moral expectations that animate *social struggles*.

To get a clearer picture of the metaethical implications of this approach, I will briefly reconstruct an early objection that Honneth raises against Habermas, before examining his discussion of “moral realism” in the context of his theory of recognition and his more recent explicit engagement with metaethical questions.

In an early article from 1990 (translated in Honneth 2007a), Honneth explicitly situates his theory in the tradition of Marx, Adorno and Habermas who, he argues, bind the normative force of moral arguments back to existing tendencies in social reality. In Habermas's case, this basis in social reality is no longer the working class but a post-conventionally socialized cultural avant-garde milieu that has internalized the communicative presuppositions of a rationalized moral discourse (Honneth 2007a, 81). The objection that Honneth raises in this context intends to show that Habermas's theory of society leads him to systematically ignore other potential sources of relevant moral claims. But with only a few adjustments, we can see that the same argument can also support a critique of moralism in Marx's spirit.

Honneth first contrasts two forms of “morality” that, as he suggests, can be found in the consciousness of cultural elites on the one hand, and in the attitudes of members of subordinated social classes on the other hand. While the first kind of consciousness features “coherent and logically connected ideas of right and wrong” (Honneth 2007a, 84), the second kind “contains no ideas of a total moral order or projections of a just society abstracted from particular situations, but is instead a highly sensitive sensorium for injuries to what these masses take to be their justified moral claims” (Honneth 2007a, 84). Part of the reason for this is that members of the oppressed classes are less subject to moral pressure to present their moral judgments in a conceptually elaborated form. However, they also are less in control of the symbolic social resources that are needed to make discursively acceptable claims. This leads him to observe that a theory that focuses primarily on the rationality of value judgments regarding the ability to make sense of validity claims (such as Habermas') will systematically exclude such moral judgments from consideration. Honneth argues, in effect, that Habermas's discourse theory runs the risk of taking over the self-

understanding of a practice of morality that excludes certain normative judgments systematically from consideration. This argument has a structural similarity to Marx's critique of moralism. But while Marx argued that an *essential* feature of the form of moral thinking as such requires people to make a *cognitive* error (to deny the practice-bound nature of their judgment), Honneth seems to assume that a *specific (mistaken) theoretical* understanding of morality (that has social significance) involves a *moral* error (as it illegitimately excludes moral judgment from the sphere of morality that has not yet risen to the level of discourse). Honneth consequently does not develop this argument to object to morality as such but as part of a defense of a competing understanding of moral requirements.

This understanding is developed in his theory of recognition. According to this theory, the moral self-understanding of any given society develops through a process of social struggle. These struggles are the result of negative experiences of misrecognition and disrespect by members of socially disadvantaged groups. Members of disadvantaged groups not only experience themselves as excluded from relations of equal recognition by others, but they also become aware that the dominant moral vocabulary in their society does not provide them with resources to draw on principles that are already discursively accepted to make a claim to be treated more justly. As a result, they engage in social struggles through which they aim at changing and enlarging the scope of concern of the social norms of their society. On this model, the moral vocabulary that is accepted in any given context expresses a commitment to historically specific norms that are the result of a social learning process. This means that the rebellion of subordinated groups against dominant, explicit moral norms is motivated by *implicit* moral judgments that do not draw on moral principles (and are therefore often mistaken for an expression of strategic self-interest) but rather on non-inferential moral experiences. These experiences are not experiences of a reality of social facts that is independent of society. Rather, they reflect a deeper level of the "moral grammar" of society, that is, the constitutive dependence of human beings on mutual recognition for their self-realization.

While Honneth's reliance on Hegel would suggest that he also takes over the expressivist

framework to which Hegel subscribes, in several articles he describes his metaethical commitments as being close to the moral realism of John McDowell (Honneth 2007b, 335; Honneth 2002b, 517). In particular, he wants to avoid a potential relativist conclusion that implies that *any* change of moral norms that reflects some form of recognition of persons must count as moral progress as long as those who experience it find it agreeable. This would make the problem of *ideological recognition* intractable (Honneth 2007b). To rule out this possibility, Honneth speculatively embraces the idea that the historical change of moral norms that emerges as a result of struggles for recognition is a learning process that reflects some kind of moral progress (Honneth 2007b, 335). As he does not want to base his argument on a non-social version of moral realism, McDowell seems a natural ally. In contrast to traditional realists, McDowell acknowledges that there is no way of characterizing the moral without reference to our faculties of moral perception (McDowell 1998). However, even such a judgment-dependent form of realism seems to be ill-suited for a project like Honneth's, as it still suggests the realist idea that a moral learning process is more a discovery of an already existing realm of truths than a construction of a moral standpoint. The idea of a revision of morality based on the negative experience of subordinated groups seems to suggest that, rather than a disinterested process of discovery, a moral learning process is better described as the result of active struggles. In fact, this is an objection that Honneth himself raises against McDowell (Honneth 2002a).

However, in a recent article Honneth has reversed his position on this matter (Honneth 2014). He now endorses a Hegelian version of Kantian constructivism. Moral self-determination, he argues, should be understood as a form of self-legislation. In contrast to the Kantian model, such self-legislation cannot start from zero. Rather, it can only be a matter of subjects taking up social rules that are already institutionalized in a practice where multiple subjects recognize each other as competent authorities over the content of the norm. In addition, the respective practices must be connected to the realization of desires and already endorsed values to develop any motivational force. Nevertheless, in spite of its social grounding, this account is not a form of relativism. Not just

any social practice will do: Honneth assumes that the very project of engaging in normative practices guided by mutual recognition will transform the desires and inclinations of its participants by involving them in processes of perspective-taking. When the motivational efficacy of a given practice depends on desires that are undermined by the engagement in mutual recognition, then this practice will fade over time (Honneth 2014, 824). This evolutionary dynamics leads to a historical development that emphasizes inclusion and individualization (Honneth 2003, 185). Independently of whether this is convincing as a moral theory, it clearly marks Honneth's return to a metaethical picture according to which moral judgments are not to be understood as describing an independent state of affairs, but as expressing a speaker's commitment. The commitment expressed by moral judgments must be understood not only as a commitment to a specific social practice but (in the case of non-ideological moral judgments) also as a commitment to a policy of revising practical rules based on insights furnished by one's taking of the other's perspective. We can combine this newer expressivist view with Honneth's original idea regarding the negativity of misrecognition. His remarks about misrecognition suggest that moral statements also typically express either the acceptance or rejection of a *second-order policy regarding whether one has to take the non-inferential perceptions of disrespect of one's interaction partners seriously*. Of course, not all empirically existing systems of moral thought will include a second-order recognition of the value of such perceptions, but the more a given society is capable of understanding itself as engaged in a process of historical learning, the more weight it will ascribe to such considerations. Read this way, Honneth's positive attitude towards modern morality is based on the same intuitions that we already find in Marx's vision of a form of normativity that is conscious of its social embeddedness and Adorno's view of negative moral experiences as granting us (defeasible) knowledge about the morally right. Of course, Honneth disagrees with both Marx and Adorno insofar as he does not think that morality must be ideological under current conditions. However, this disagreement is not to be located on a metaethical, but on a social-theoretical level. While Marx and Adorno assume that the dominance of the second-order logics of ideology and identity-thinking are secured by the

very structure of capitalist society, Honneth assumes that such a logic, as far as it exists at all, cannot be more than a temporary disruption of a historical process of struggle that tends towards moral progress.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the discussion of the metaethical views of critical theorists, I have empathized a number of shared features: First, their commitment to the claim that morality is connected to a wider context of social practices and that understanding this embeddedness is essential for understanding the meaning of moral statements and their aspiration to objectivity. Second, they all reject relativism and subjectivism regarding the normative. Third, I have sketched different critiques of morality as involving defective second-order commitments. It is apparent, however, that these shared features only form the backdrop for deep disagreements about the function and viability of morality as a form of thought and about the correct metaethical analysis of moral statements. But it has perhaps also become clear that these disagreements are not based on different metaphysical or semantic assumptions – as it is the case in the analytic debate. Rather, the social picture of morality that critical theorists unequivocally endorse changes the terrain of the debate. Different metaethical analyses in this debate can be shown to depend on different assumptions regarding the correct concepts for social analysis. In particular, the question of how far societies form an integrated totality explains why Marx and Adorno endorse the claim that moral discourse depends on more general forms of interaction and that the ideological features of moralism must therefore be explained by reference to defective forms of society, whereas Habermas, who rejects the idea of the totality, can introduce a distinctive logic of the rationalization of communication and thus understand ideological forms of morality as a separate problem from social pathologies. Similarly, the question of non-inferential moral experience as something that constrains social and individual self-legislation is answered in different ways by Marx, Adorno and Honneth. While Marx claims that morality is overcome by a cognitive insight into the practice-bound nature of normativity in the

course of a revolutionary transformation of social life, Adorno believes that it is the resistance of the non-subsumable parts of individual and social experience through which resistance to ideology gets a foothold. For Honneth, negativity is finally always already essential for the social in the form of social struggle.

Of course, these considerations move the debate away from concerns that are typically recognized as belonging to metaethics. However, as soon as the overwhelmingly plausible premise of critical theories is accepted, namely that morality is not only socially determined regarding its content, but also a socially structured *form of thought*, any convincing metaethical account must answer the question what understanding of society it presupposes. If such an attempt were to be seriously undertaken by analytic metaethicists, they would not be able to ignore the insights that have already been won during the hundred-fifty years of discussion of these matters by critical theorists.

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