

RECOGNITION, GOOD LIFE, AND GOOD WORLD

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide a philosophical analysis of the relationship between self-realization and social recognition on the basis of a view that I characterize as “pragmatist.” According to this view, an individual realizes herself to the extent that she acts for the sake of establishing rational and dynamic interactions with her natural and social environment. Focusing on the social sphere, I show that we can interpret such interactions as relations of mutual recognition between an individual, who thus receives the ontological and ethical status of personhood, and an environment, which thereby acquires the normative and institutional features of society. Insofar as interactions with the surrounding reality are constitutive of a person’s self-realization, and not mere conditions of possibility, I finally suggest that we conceive of the problem of human flourishing in terms not only of the “good life” but also of the “good world.”

Keywords: Self-Realization, Recognition, Pragmatism, Social Ontology, Personhood.

In short, the thing actually at stake in any serious deliberation is not a difference of quantity, but what kind of person one is to become, what sort of self is in the making, what kind of a world is making. (John Dewey)

1. Introduction: Self-Realization and Society

It is a widely held idea that the more a society enables people to freely realize themselves and lead a good life, the more positively it can be judged; and likewise, as a consequence, the more a social order impedes people from developing themselves and flourishing, the more it must be criticized. However, this idea contains two issues that are not always adequately addressed.

The first concerns the very concept of *self-realization*. In contemporary philosophy, both Aristotelian and Marxist as well as liberal approaches have mostly presupposed the meaning of this concept.¹ There is undoubtedly a basic agreement on understanding this term as one of the major ways through which it is possible to address the problem of the *good life*. Since Socrates, a life is regarded as good, and therefore worth living, to the extent that a person realizes herself, i.e., pursues those ends that give value to her existence. Nevertheless, the philosophical debate (but the same is true also for psychology, sociology, economics and political theory) has made few steps beyond this assumption. This raises, therefore, a problem at the very heart of projects aimed at the elaboration of an ethics of the good life or a critical theory of society: without an adequate reflection on the concept of “self-realization,” it is not possible in fact to identify and evaluate the contexts that foster or impede human flourishing.

The second issue concerns the *relationship* between self-realization and society. This relationship is usually conceived of as a one-sided dynamic exercised by institutions on individuals, that is, in terms of social promotion or inhibition of the good life. Such a view, however, is not entirely compelling for two main reasons. First of all, it does not leave individuals any freedom beyond that allowed by the social order, assuming thereby that persons are passive towards the normative pressure exerted by institutions. Secondly, it ignores the *feedback effects* that, under normal circumstances, occur between society and individuals. By speaking of “feedback effects” I mean the fact that every norm established by institutions has consequences on citizens’ actions (for example, they may approve or get indignant) and these actions, in turn, affect the decisions of institutions (which may see their policies confirmed or rejected).

These remarks show that it is not possible to reduce the relationship between self-realization and society to a dynamic of one-sided conditioning. An effective tool for examining this problem, taking account of its complexity, is represented by the notion of *recognition*, which allows us to see a reciprocal relationship between individuals’ claims to pursue their valuable ends and the need of institutional structures to maintain social unity and ensure their own existence.

1 There are some prominent exceptions, such as the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum; see e.g. Sen 1999. The topic has also been investigated by contemporary virtue ethics, especially in its Aristotelian version; see e.g. Annas 2011, ch. 7-9. Particularly important for a clarification of the *concept* of “self-realization” are Elster 1986, pp. 99-110; Gewirth 1998, ch. 1; Schlette 2013, part 2.

Given these considerations, the aim of this paper is to provide a philosophical analysis of the relationship between self-realization and social recognition. In order to do so, I proceed as follows: (2) I first examine the most common view of self-realization, which I call “expressivist”; (3) after criticizing its assumptions, I take into consideration a possible alternative, which I characterize as “pragmatist”; (4) I then turn to the social relevance of self-realization, focusing in particular on the concept of “recognition”; in light of this analysis, (5) I finally suggest the need to conceive of human flourishing not only in terms of the “good life” but also of the “good world.”

2. *What is Self-Realization? The Expressivist View*

2.1. *Self-Realization as Self-Expression*

The most common way, not only in philosophy, to understand self-realization is to consider it as the capacity of a human being to *express* herself, that is, to actualize her inner potential (P). According to this perspective – which we can therefore call *expressivist*² – self-realization refers to a process of manifestation and development of P , i.e., those characteristics and abilities that distinguish a human being or a person and that she therefore has reason to value. These characteristics and abilities are intended as an individual’s specific properties that must be given “voice,” so to speak. Expression is therefore a passage from potentiality to actuality.³

The most relevant example of this view is Aristotelian ethics. As is well known, Aristotle argues that the ultimate goal of our actions, which repre-

2 I take this term from Taylor 1989, ch. 21, but I use it with a slightly different meaning. On these topics see also Taylor 1991.

3 The way in which this potentiality is conceived allows us to distinguish between a *universalist* and an *individualist* variant of expressivism. The former understands self-realization as the process through which a human being x realizes her essence or universal nature, that is, the property (or set of properties) P_U that makes a certain individual a member of the human kind. In the universalist conception, therefore, x realizes herself to the extent that she expresses P_U . The individualist variant understands self-realization as the process through which a human being x expresses her specificity, i.e., that quality (or set of qualities) P_I that characterizes her in a peculiar way, making her unique and irreducible to other human beings. Since it is not relevant to the purposes of this paper, I will not explore this distinction further.

sents for us the “highest good,” is happiness (*eudaimonia*). This consists in the fulfillment by the human being of her specific function (*ergon*), namely, of that property *P* that characterizes her in an essential way. This function is notoriously identified by Aristotle as *logos*, that is, the human capacity to think, grasp meanings, and communicate them. *Logos* refers exactly to that fundamental property *P* that is common to all human beings as such and that allows us to distinguish them, for example, from non-human animals. Given this premise, therefore, the ultimate goal of self-realization – happiness – can only consist, for Aristotle, in the “activity of soul which follows or implies reason,” (*NE*, 1098a 7-8) that is, in a life led by the full exercise and development of rationality.

2.2. *Genesis and Effects: Two Problems of Expressivism*

The expressivist view represents the most common and familiar way of conceiving of human self-realization, that is, as an expression of inner potential. This perspective, however, has limits that undermine its internal coherence. In particular, these limits concern the relationship between individuals and their *environment*, namely, that complex of natural and social conditions into which human beings are inserted and with which they constantly interact. According to the expressivist view, the realization of the property (or set of properties) *P* is structured in the form of a state transition from the interiority of an individual *x* to her exteriority, that is, from a time t_1 , in which *x* possesses *P* internally but does not manifest it externally, to a time t_2 , in which *x* possesses *P* and manifests it externally. With respect to this apparently trivial framework, (at least) two objections can be raised, both concerning *x*'s relationship with her environment: in one case, *x* is isolated from the context present at t_1 ; in the other, *x* is isolated from the context present at t_2 .

a) The first problem arises from the fact that the expressivist view seems to abstract *x* from the complex of external conditions present in t_1 , thus assuming the existence of *P* as a context-free datum. In this way, expressivism does not seem to provide a sufficient explanation of the *genesis* of potential properties, i.e., of the role that natural and social factors play in the initial determination of the qualities of *x*, and therefore of the reasons that make certain properties constitutive of *x*, while others are merely contingent.

This is not to say, of course, that the expressivist view does not contemplate the influence of external factors on human self-realization. In Aristotle, for example, a city ruled by a bad government can hinder the

full development of the rational faculty. The problem with expressivism, however, is that it regards the very *existence* of potentialities as independent of external factors. In other words, given its ontological premises, the expressivist view admits an influence of the environment exclusively on the *transition* from potentiality to actuality (i.e., on the process of self-realization), but not on the definition of potentiality as such (i.e., on whether the human being is, for example, a rational animal).⁴

b) The second problem which, in my opinion, undermines the coherence of the expressivist view concerns the role x plays in affecting the external conditions present in t_2 . A close look at the processes of self-realization should acknowledge that it is not only environmental factors that influence the development of a human being, but that it is also this development that influences the environment in which the human being is located. Expressivism does not seem to properly consider the *effects* of self-realization, i.e., the consequences that P 's transition from potentiality to actuality has on the natural and social conditions in which x is situated. The problem, however, is that the development of certain qualities does not leave the world as it was before such development. Taking an example from the natural world, we can think of the fact that it is not only the quality of the soil, the quantity of precipitation and the exposure to the sun that influence the acorn, allowing it to take root in the ground and become an oak tree, but it is the very development of the acorn that modifies the surrounding landscape, to the extent that, for example, its oak roots, by lengthening, change the composition of the soil, or its branches, by strengthening, host bird nests.

Conceiving of self-realization as the mere transition from a time t_1 , in which x possesses certain qualities but does not manifest them, to a time t_2 , in which x manifests these qualities, ends up neglecting the role played by the environment both as the “starting point” of human flourishing and as its “ending point.” Natural and social conditions are taken into account by expressivism only insofar as they resist or facilitate the process of self-realization; their role in determining the qualities of x and the effects that the development of these qualities has on them (e.g., the impact on natural ecosystems or social balances) is ignored. In other words, the expressivist view upholds an exclusively *instrumental* conception of the external world.

4 On the complexities related to the concept of “potentiality” see Engelhard, Quante 2018.

3. What is Self-Realization? The Pragmatist Alternative

In light of these conclusions, I would now like to outline a possible alternative to expressivism – an alternative that understands environmental conditions as a *constitutive*, rather than instrumental, element of human self-realization. On this proposal, it is not a person’s inner potential that determines the value of the ends toward which she must steer her life, but her ability to *interact in a rational and dynamic way with her environment*. It is important to focus first on the two key concepts of this definition, namely *environment* and *interaction*.

3.1. The Concept of “Environment”

By “environment” I mean, as we have already partly seen, the complex of natural and social conditions in which a human being is “ontologically embedded,” so to speak, and on which both her subsistence and her development depend. Among the many philosophers who have addressed the concept of “environment,” the one who comes closest to what I have in mind is John Dewey, who writes:

Human nature exists and operates in an environment. And it is not “in” that environment as coins are in a box, but as a plant is in the sunlight and soil. It is of them, continuous with their energies, dependent upon their support, capable of increase only as it utilizes them, and as it gradually rebuilds from their crude indifference an environment genially civilized (Dewey 1983, p. 204).

Thus understood, the environment is not simply a “background” against which human beings stand out, but the set of factors that together define the human form of life, in both its biological basis and its moral development. This means, as a result, that it is not possible to adequately understand a human being (at least from a philosophical point of view) if we do not conceive of her within her environment, that is, as a contextualized subject: the natural and social conditions in which she acts are not an external limit, but an integral part of her constitution. Hence, an individual does not determine herself regardless of her relationships with the world, but only *because* of them. A human being is already committed to interacting with things and with other individuals: these relationships do not arise *after* she has determined herself, but rather are an essential component of her. A person, therefore, can authentically flourish only by passing through the world and interacting

with other persons. Thus, the relationship with the environment is, in this perspective, *constitutive* of personal identity.⁵

3.2. *The Dynamics of Interaction*

The second key term in the view I am outlining is “interaction.” Following another pragmatist philosopher, George Herbert Mead, I use this term to denote the relationship of reciprocity (which does not necessarily mean “symmetry”) between an individual and her environment. Speaking of “interaction” means referring to a dynamic of mutual adaptation between an entity x and her environment E . In this sense, the relationship between x and E implies that it is not only E that adapts to the action of x , but that it is also x that adapts to the configuration of E . Consequently, if x_1 acts in the time t_1 modifying E_1 , what will arise in t_2 are not x_1 and E_2 , but x_2 and E_2 . In this respect, every action is nothing but the “adjustive response” to an external solicitation, just as in fencing – Mead explains – the parry is nothing but “an interpretation of the thrust” (Mead 1934, p. 78).

The relationship between the individual and the environment is therefore neither a contraposition nor a simple juxtaposition, but a peculiar dynamic of reciprocal action. Therefore, to say that human self-realization consists in a person’s ability to “interact in a rational and dynamic way” with her environment means that, in order to successfully realize herself, the person must be able, on the one hand, to calibrate her own forces on the basis of the existing state of things and, on the other, to modify this state of things in order to improve it.

It is hence possible to differentiate between two phases of interaction: in the first one, it is x that adapts to E , by adjusting her actions to the natural and social conditions in which she is situated (for example, if I am unhappy with the current legislation in my country regarding LGBTIQ rights, I can gather information and evaluate the most effective means at my disposal to change this state of affairs); in the second phase it is instead E that adapts to x , responding to her drive for realization (my attempt may succeed: the legislation changes, granting more rights to LGBTIQ people and thus allowing me to live in a society that I consider more dignified and in which I have more opportunities to realize myself; or my attempt may fail: the legislation does not change, but I have learned how to reset my strategy of action in order to try again to change things; in the meantime, having involved other people or institutions in my cause, I have still influenced their civic conscience. In

5 For a development of this perspective, see Quante 2018.

both cases, therefore, my attempt to pursue my valuable ends has produced an alteration in the structure of my environment, although in the first case this environment has been responsive to my solicitation, while in the second case it has resisted). *X*'s attempt will engender new conditions to which she can adapt herself, recalibrating the direction of her own development. These two phases imply each other: only if the mutual influence between a person and her environment are sufficiently rational and dynamic will the interaction be truly successful, allowing the individual to realize herself.

These clarifications are also important in order not to misinterpret the notion of "adaptation" used above. The fact that our action must adapt to the environment does not mean that it must preserve the existing state of affairs. On the contrary, the ability to calibrate the action on the actual configuration of reality, rather than on the basis of mere abstractions, is a necessary condition for its improvement: a successful action is determined as much by a correct assessment of its strengths as by an adequate consideration of the factors that may hinder or facilitate it. An appropriate adaptive response is therefore essential to modifying reality and ensuring better conditions for one's own as well as others' future actions.

In the *pragmatist* (or interactionist) view I am outlining, then, to realize oneself means to establish successful relationships with one's natural and social environment, that is, to determine the world in order to feel "at home" in it. The purpose of this is not instrumental (the world as a means to self-realization), since, as we have already seen, the environment is not an external limitation, but an essential component of a person's identity.⁶ Accordingly, as Mead has well explained:

The organism [i.e., the human being], then, is in a sense *responsible* for its environment. And since organism and environment determine each other and are mutually dependent for their existence, it follows that the life-process, to be adequately understood, must be considered in terms of their interrelations (Mead 1934, p. 130; my emphasis).

It is then possible to state that, in the pragmatist view, a human being's self-realization does not occur only "in" the world, but also "with" the world. In this way, the pursuit of the good life is linked not to the ability to express inner potentialities, as in expressivism, but to the possibility of making a good *world*.⁷

6 This point is very well analyzed by Jaeggi 2014, ch. 10.

7 On the ethical notion of the "good world" cf. Siep 2004. On the sociological front, Hartmut Rosa developed the idea that a good life consists of a relationship

4. *Recognition as the Form of Social Interaction*

Before I come back to the concept of the “good world,” I would like to focus in more detail on the relationship between self-realization and the social environment. In the previous paragraph I defined self-realization as the rational and dynamic interaction of a person with her environment. Given the initial abstractness of this definition, I have tried to clarify the main concepts it contains, trying to show in particular that the interaction I am talking about is not a dynamic of mere passive adaptation of the human being to the environment, but a particular form of *action*. This means that the individual, in addition to being subjected to the pressure of surrounding reality, also actively influences that reality while pursuing her valuable ends. In order to be truly productive of self-realization, this influence must be structured rationally and dynamically: it must be *rational*, since, to be successful, the action must be calibrated in a thoughtful and well-informed way on the actual configuration of the environment (rather than on imaginary projections or abstract ideals); and it must be *dynamic*, since it must ensure that the environment is responsive to its solicitation.

In my opinion, an appropriate way to understand the social form of the interaction, conceived in this way, is to interpret it as *recognition*. Therefore, I would like now to examine this concept, focusing in particular on those which I hold as the two main dimensions it contains, namely the *ontological* dimension and the *ethical* dimension.⁸ This analysis should help clarify not only the nature of social interaction as such, but also and above all the structure of human self-realization.

4.1. *The Ontological Dimension of Recognition*

Recognition has an ontological dimension insofar as it is *constitutive* of social interaction and of the entities involved in it. From this point of view, it therefore fulfills two interrelated functions:

a) it makes social interaction the kind of relation it is, i.e., a *relation of mutual recognition*, and thus distinguishes it from other kinds of relations (e.g., dynamics of biological adaptation);

of “resonance” with reality, meaning a relationship “in which subject and world are mutually affected and transformed”; for Rosa, resonance “is not an echo, but a responsive relationship, requiring that both sides speak with their own voices” (Rosa 2019, p. 174).

8 I take this distinction from Ikäheimo 2010.

b) it makes individuals and the environment that interact entities of a particular kind, which we hence call, respectively, *persons* and *societies*, and thus distinguishes them from entities of other kinds (e.g., non-human animals or the environment understood as natural habitat).

I try to address these two functions separately.

a) The claim that recognition makes social interaction the kind of relation it is implies that there are many forms of relationship and that social interaction is only one among them. This presupposes, accordingly, that not all relationships are *interactions*, nor are all interactions *social* interactions. On the one hand, there are relations which do not consist in a mutual adaptation and which are therefore not interactions as defined above (see § 3.2); a case of non-interactive relation is, for example, the distance between me and the planet Saturn: it is a relation, insofar as it constitutes a link between two objects; but it is not an interaction, since it does not consist in a reciprocal action of any kind. On the other hand, there are interactions that do not have a social scope, meaning that they do not consist of relationships of mutual adaptation between a person and a society; when I walk in a field, for example, I am interacting with it, since the soil adapts to the pressure of my body just as my body adapts to the composition of the soil. This interaction is between me as a physical organism, and not as a person (in the technical sense of this term, to which I will return shortly), and a natural environment.

On the basis of these distinctions, it is then possible to state that a relation consists ontologically in a social interaction, properly speaking, insofar as it is configured as a relation of mutual adaptation between a person and a society, that is, as a *recognitive* interaction. By defining recognition in this way, we thus attribute to it the characteristics of interaction mentioned above, namely, rationality and dynamism: an interaction is properly recognitive only if the two poles – the person and the society – relate to each other in an adequately *trained* way, and only if they are mutually *responsive*.⁹

In order to understand what this means we can use an example. Consider a relationship of misrecognition between an employee and her boss, due to the fact that, on the one hand, he constantly underestimates her and treats her as a factotum at his disposal; on the other hand, she harbors a strong resentment towards him, due precisely to the feeling of being treated

9 See in this regard Laitinen 2002.

unfairly. Focusing on the manager's behavior, we can point to two main aspects that cause the lack of recognition. The first has to do with his inability to recognize the employee's skills and commitment in the same way that an illiterate person fails to understand the meaning of a written text; the second aspect concerns, as a partial consequence of the first, the boss's inability to adequately respond to the employee's behavior and therefore to treat her with the esteem and respect she deserves.

b) Recognition also fulfills a second ontological function, which in this case concerns not the relation but the *relata*. I have already stated that not all interactions are social interactions; the constitutive nature of interaction, however, makes it so that if it changes, the elements it links together will also somehow change. This means that the concepts of "individual" and "environment" must be specified according to the kind of interaction they involve or, in the likely case where they simultaneously involve interactions of more than one kind, according to the kind of interaction on which we focus. Generally speaking, we can then use the terms "organism" and "nature" in the context of natural interactions (e.g., chemical or ethological) and the terms "person" and "society" in the context of social interactions.

As noted above, however, the use of different terms reflects different entities. This means, consequently, that talking about the "human organism" is not the same as talking about a *person*. As an example, just consider the fact that infants or people in a vegetative state are often not accorded the (legal) status of personhood; and on the other hand, we can imagine entities from other planets, and therefore not belonging to the species *Homo sapiens*, to which personhood could be legitimately ascribed. I do not intend to go into the details of the debate on personal identity; here it is sufficient to claim that, in the pragmatist view I am sketching, personhood has a social character, which means that it consists in a specific ontological status that depends neither on biological constitution nor on individual psychology, but on interactions of recognition.¹⁰

The same is also true for *society*, which cannot be ontologically reduced to the natural environment. Recognitive interactions in fact determine the fabric of the social environment, making it something qualitatively different from a simple aggregate of human beings; this is the reason why even a large group of highly organized individuals driven by common values, as is the case, for example, in a political demonstra-

10 See on this Quante 2018, ch. 2. Cf. also Ikäheimo 2007.

tion or in the stands of a soccer stadium, cannot be properly understood as society. To the extent that society means the complex of rational and responsive conditions with which persons interact, it is a peculiar kind of environment.¹¹

This characterization should not be understood as a defense of an ontological dualism between the natural dimension and the social (or cultural) dimension. On the contrary, it aims to establish a continuity and mutual implication between them: on the one hand, the configuration of a society (also) depends on its “natural basis,” namely, on the organisms and material structures that compose it (e.g., certain geographical conditions); on the other hand, this “natural basis” can be shaped by the social environment (as is the case, for instance, when education modifies the constitution of a person). Recognitive interactions themselves are symbolic, and therefore cultural, mediations of natural elements insofar as, for example, they transform sounds and gestures into words and actions endowed with socially shared meanings, and thereby enable mutual understanding between persons. Recognition thus presupposes the natural dimension, e.g., the presence of sense organs, though it is not reducible to it (as is the case with the causal response to a stimulus). This point can be somehow summarized through the concept of *second nature*, which here means both that human nature is constitutively (though not exclusively) social, and that society is a natural result of human interaction.¹²

4.2. *The Ethical Dimension of Recognition*

Recognition determines not only the character of the entities and relationships involved in social interaction, but also their *quality*; this means that it has an *ethical* as well as an ontological dimension. In this regard, recognition is crucial for two interrelated issues:

- a) for the definition of the goodness of *persons'* lives;
- b) for the definition of the goodness of *society's* development.

11 For a defense of an interactionist social ontology, see Frega 2018. On the role of recognition in determining the fabric of (modern) society, Honneth 2014 is undoubtedly crucial.

12 This seems to me to be also the core thesis of Dewey's naturalism. For a powerful contemporary development of the idea that the notions of “nature” and “culture” depend on the different ways in which humans' relationship to their environment is understood, see the anthropological study by Descola 2013.

I proceed to examine both in more detail.

a) How can appropriately recognizing interactions make our lives as persons *better*? This concerns first of all the acknowledgement that our individual existence and agency are constitutively bound up with the existence and agency of others. A long tradition, ranging from Descartes to Kant up to Rawls, has conceived of persons as “monological” structures, that is, as entities that constitute themselves independently of their encounters with the world; in this way, the subject privately establishes her own identity and values, and only later does she face reality and associate or clash with other subjects. In this conception, the other person is hence primarily a *limitation* on my attempt to pursue my valuable ends and my self-realization.

As has already been argued (see § 3.1), the pragmatist view reverses this conception. From an ethical point of view, this means not only that it is “better” or “easier” for a person to achieve her ends if helped by other persons, but also and above all that the existence and contribution of others are constitutive of the determination of these ends and their specific value. In other words, I cannot define who I am and what really matters to me without entering into relationships of social interaction. This is important both on the *psychological* level, insofar as recognition produces the self-esteem, respect, and trust in others necessary to freely set my life plans, and on the *intersubjective* level, insofar as it generates bonds of solidarity and cooperation that enable me to implement those plans in society.¹³ It is therefore crucial for my self-realization that others recognize me as a person, that is, as an individual capable of sustaining rational and dynamic interactions (and not as a mere object, a lower organism, a non-responsible subject, etc.), and that I myself recognize them as persons. It is in this regard that it is possible to claim that adequate recognitive interactions are constitutive of a good life.

b) The fact that the flourishing of a person is tied in an essential way to her interaction with society leads us to take recognition as a criterion for evaluating the quality of a social order as well. It is therefore possible to consider the goodness of a society, its institutions and its normative structure, on the basis of its ability to establish successful interactions with the persons who inhabit it. This means that the more a society takes the form of

13 These issues have been extensively investigated by Honneth 1996.

an environment that is rationally responsive to the claims for recognition of its citizens, both as individuals and as groups or collectivity, the more this society can be judged positively. The terms “responsive” and “rational” stand here for two fundamental aspects.¹⁴

First, a social environment is *responsive* insofar as it is capable not only of acknowledging people’s normative demands, for example the demands for recognition raised by ethnic minorities, religious communities or trade unions, but also and above all of “incorporating” these demands into its own social fabric. In this way, a society is good only if it is not perceived by the people who compose it as an extraneous dimension to which they strive to join. That is, an environment is good when it respects people rather than humiliates them, is one to which they feel they belong and contribute, and is structured by values and norms which individuals freely share.¹⁵

Secondly, a social environment is *rational* insofar as it regards recognitive interactions as public dynamics and as revisable in light of well-justified criticism. This is an important point: it is indeed possible to imagine a totalitarian society in which all its citizens fully recognize themselves and feel perfectly “at home,” either because they really share its ideals or because, after a strong propaganda campaign, they only believe they share these ideals. We must then ask: what separates such an organic society from an *actually* good social environment?¹⁶ A key distinguishing criterion lies precisely in the possibility of considering the interactions of recognition, and the normative claims embedded in them, as practices endowed with a rational content that can always enter the so-called “game of giving and asking for reasons”¹⁷: they can be made the subject of public discussion and can be appropriately rectified in light of justified criticism, new observations, or new arguments. In this way, therefore, recognition does not produce a homogeneous social mixture, as is the case in a totalitarian society. To use the terminology of mechanics, we can say that a good society, in the pragmatist meaning, does not aim at a “static equilibrium” that neutralizes any tension, but rather at a “dynamic equilibrium” that develops precisely because of the different normative claims embedded in persons’ instances of self-realization.

14 Cf. Laitinen 2003.

15 Cf. Taylor 1992. On the importance that society does not humiliate persons see Margalit 1996.

16 See Rosa 2019, ch. VII.3 more extensively on this question.

17 Cf. Brandom 1994.

5. *Concluding Remarks: the Good Life and the Good World*

In this contribution I have tried to explore the concept of “self-realization” on the basis of a philosophical view that I characterized as “pragmatist.” According to this view, an individual realizes herself to the extent that she acts in order to establish appropriately rational and dynamic interactions with her natural and social environment. Focusing on the social sphere, I tried to show that we can interpret such interactions as relations of mutual recognition between an individual, who thus receives the ontological and ethical status of personhood, and an environment, which thereby acquires the normative and institutional features of society.

These conclusions should have helped clarify two main issues. The first is that adequate recognitive interactions are *constitutive* of the good life; namely, they are not mere conditions of possibility that a person or a society must provide in order to facilitate the pursuit of autonomously determined valuable ends and thus self-realization. In the pragmatist view I have sketched, the good life *consists*, on the social level,¹⁸ in adequately rational and dynamic relations of mutual recognition (in the sense of these terms defined above).

The second issue concerns the fact that society is not to be understood, according to this view, as a mere set of “external” factors that can allow or block human flourishing, but rather as an essential component of it. This means that a good life can be truly achieved to the extent that it is not only the person who develops certain qualities or pursues certain valuable ends, but also the social world with which she interacts that flourishes.

These conclusions stand in opposition to the common view that understands self-realization as a “narcissistic” activity: to realize *myself*, it is argued, I must make myself the object of my care and attention, cultivate my interiority and thereby ensure that my potential is authentically expressed, that is, without suffering interference and distortion. Such a view, however, is based on the assumption that my identity – meaning the answer to the question “who am I?” – is somehow encapsulated within me. Given this idea, the outside world can, in the most favorable of circumstances, only help me realize this potential, or at least not obstruct me.

18 This specification is crucial, since full self-realization also involves the natural level of human life (e.g., an individual’s physical endowment or state of health). On this issue, which I do not address in the present contribution, see Manchisi 2021.

In the alternative I have proposed, a person's identity is not defined independently or even in spite of the world, but rather precisely through it. It is the network of my interactions that determines who I am and what matters to me. This does not mean that I am merely a passive subject under the pressure exerted by reality: on the contrary, since interaction is a relationship of reciprocal action, I can "make the best of what I am" only if I make the *world* better. Self-realization must therefore be understood as a process not of introflection but of extroflection, that is, as a commitment to *act* in order to make a good world.

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