DEPATHOLOGISING RECOGNITION: ETHICAL SCAFFOLDING, OPENNESS TO INDETERMINACY, AND DIACHRONICITY

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Abstract

Recognition can serve as a moral principle, directed at understanding and promoting the human capacity to criticise and transform frames of signification and normativity. For it to be so directed, recognition should be enforced and scaffolded by other principles with which cooperation within moral reasoning can be established. Taking my cue from several of Axel Honneth's reflections, I argue for an intersection of recognition and autonomy that leaves room for indeterminacy and diachronicity. First, I discuss the possibility of regarding recognitional phenomena as being non-immediate; second, I intersect the dynamics of recognition with those of autonomy by showing that recognition should be scaffolded by a precise definition of 'autonomy'; third, I propose leaving recognition undetermined and undefined so that the human capacity to criticise, create, and respond to change can be valued. Being recognised as autonomous is thus equivalent to being deemed capable of co-authoring one's own life and its meanings.

Keywords: Pathologies of recognition, Autonomy, Indeterminacy, Diachronicity.

1. *Recognition: Remedy or Poison?*

As the first step of this contribution, I attempt to analyse recognitional dynamics by referring to a form of naturalisation: the health–pathology model. Some clarification is needed before reconstructing the link between the health–pathology model, the theory of recognition, and issues concerning naturalisation. My starting point is that interpreting recognitional phenomena as natural is not problematic per se. However, these patterns become invisible when they are assimilated as natural to such an extent that they become essentially immediate. In such a case, recognition operates more as a poison than as a remedy for moral life. The analysis of society in terms of social pathology, which can be traced back to the Frankfurt School, has recently focused on the pathologies of recognition

thanks to the work of Axel Honneth, which has sparked a huge debate that has only increased in recent years.[1] This model has many resources, as expected, but it also has several limitations that elucidate the extent to which relations of recognition can be considered immediately natural.

The classification of suffering in terms of social pathology has the merit of conceptualising the ethical life of the individual as unavoidably entangled with society, as well as acknowledging that the material and symbolic aspects of human life are intertwined. The social dimension is not an option for ethical life; rather, it is the condition thereof. The problem with the semantics of pathologies is that, despite the varied nuances, it gives the impression that it would function naturally or be easily recovered, and that there is no room for a critical distance or for a critical commitment among all the actors involved to construct a definition of a life worth living. Far from denying or discussing a natural component in our common life, the peculiarity of humanity as such is that it can deliberately and reflectively endorse or deny – at least in part – what seems natural and assume it to be a form of normative guidance. Indeed, the idea of an agreement concerning the values to be promoted in the processes of recognition – which seems to be presupposed in the struggles for recognition – conflicts with a diagnostic approach that appears to identify, once and for all, the safe and appropriate mechanisms by which a society should function.

The image of pathologies applied to society is considered either literally or metaphorically: In the first case, society is seen as akin to an organism whose biological rules are immediately normatively binding; in the second case, a pathology represents a deviation from the ideal that runs the risk of being immutably fixed. Honneth's conception of social pathologies has long been analysed with a focus on its connection with recogni-

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1   Some international journals have recently devoted special issues to the topic of social pathologies, focusing on Axel Honneth's revival of the theme. See the contributions of Freyenhagen and Schaub in "Critical Horizons", 16, 2, 2015, a special issue devoted to Honneth's *The Freedom's Right*; "European Journal of Social Theory", 22, 1, 2019, which contains at least three different taxonomies of social pathology (see N. Harris, *Recovering the Critical Potential of Social Pathologies Diagnosis*; A. Laitinen, A. Särkelä, *Four Conceptions of Social Pathology*; O. Hirvonen, J. Pennanen, *Populism as a Pathological Form of Politics of Recognition*); "Studies in Social and Political Thought", 28, 2018, Special Issue Conference Edition: *Critical Theory and the Concept of Social Pathology*. Here I am interested in social pathologies to the extent that they intersect with the topic of recognition.

tion. A brief account of this debate is useful here.[2] Finnish authors such as Hirvonen, Laitinen, Ikäheimo, and Särkelä emblematically analyse the connection between Honneth's concept of social pathology and his theory of recognition. They do not criticise the possibility of using the concept of pathology in critical social theory; on the contrary, they find it to be a useful tool. Moreover, they support Honneth's idea that social pathologies are the outcome of the distorted relations of recognition. What they discuss is Honneth's interpretation of that concept, in an attempt to accentuate the role of self-realisation and to deepen a socio-ontological perspective in the definition of recognitional social pathologies.[3] On the one hand, Laitinen and Ikäheimo problematise Zurn's interpretation of social pathologies as second-order disorders explicitly endorsed by Honneth[4] (I will come back to this interpretation below.) On the other hand, Hirvonen[5] and Särkelä criticise the second concept of social pathologies as it emerges in Honneth's writings, claiming that it is based on an organicist view of society. Organicism, so their argument goes, considers the pathological social mechanisms that impede the reproduction of society as a whole, but even the reproduction of society can be a source of social pathologies. Upon closer examination, Särkelä in particular highlights that social pathologies emerge when an excess of stasis or an excess of turbulent change prevails. Therefore, a balance between these two forces should be found in order to maintain social evolution and development.[6]

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2   For a recent and exhaustive discussion of the state of the art of Finnish contributions to this topic, see C. Piroddi, *Pathologies of Society and Social Philosophy: New Perspectives from Finland*, in "Distinktion: A Journal of Social Theory", 22, 1, 2021, pp. 60-82. Here, I follow his path in reconstructing the Finnish interpretation of Honneth's concept of social pathology. See also P. Verovšek, *Social Criticism as Medical Diagnosis? On the Role of Social Pathology and Crisis within Critical Theory*, in "Thesis Eleven", 155, 1, 2019, pp. 109-126.

3   This point is clearly explained by C. Piroddi, *Pathologies of Society*, cit., p. 68.

4   See A. Honneth, *The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept*, in "Social Research", 81, 3, 2014, pp. 683-703; A. Laitinen, *Social Pathologies, Reflexive Pathologies, and the Idea of Higher-Order Disorders*, in "Studies in Social and Political Thought", 25, 2, 2015, pp. 44-65; H. Ikäheimo, *Conceptualizing Causes for Lack of Recognition: Capacities, Costs and Understanding*, in "Studies in Social and Political Thought", 25, 2, 2015, pp. 25-42.

5   See O. Hirvonen, *Pathologies of Collective Recognition*, in "Studies in Social and Political Thought", 25, 2, 2015, pp. 210-226.

6   See A. Särkelä, *Degeneration of Associated Life: Dewey's Naturalism about Social Criticism*, in "Transactions of Charles S. Peirce Society", 53, 1, 2017, pp. 107-126.

Moreover, Särkelä and Laitinen have recently referred to another double-sidedness in Honneth's conception of social pathologies by pointing out that they range from the normativism of his earlier writings to the naturalism, referred to as 'organicism', of his most recent interventions on this topic. Instead, they propose a kind of naturalism that equates society to a living process, rather than a substance.[7] I would term such naturalism a 'soft' version. However, my point here is that, even if it is corrected, as some Finnish thinkers attempt to do, the image of social pathologies as the outcome of processes or relations of (mis)recognition runs the risk of being considered something that happens because of its own laws that are not (or are only partly) modifiable, as it clearly emerges from the evolutionary consideration of the development of society about which Särkelä refers to the perceptive fabric of recognition pointed out by Laitinen.[8] What would deserve further discussion is their consideration of recognition as something that not only calls for action, negotiation, and clash but can also be traced back to natural mechanisms or reactions to objective qualities. Moreover, according to this viewpoint, patterns of interpersonal recognition literally build society, and this data cannot be changed. I follow the line of thought opened by the abovementioned Finnish thinkers since it seems to me to be consistent with Honneth's position. For this reason, I discuss the idea of social pathology as it emerges from Honneth and that those thinkers partly support, to the extent that they endorse a kind of naturalism. Depathologising recognition will thus mean partly denaturalising and denormalising[9] it at all levels, from the intra-individual level to the interpersonal, social, and institutional levels.

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7   See A. Laitinen, A. Särkelä, *Between Normativism and Naturalism: Honneth on Social Pathologies*, in "Constellations", 26, 2019, pp. 286-300. Regarding naturalism applied to the paradigm of recognition, see also I. Testa, *La natura del riconoscimento. Riconoscimento naturale e ontologia sociale nello Hegel di Jena*, Mimesis, Milano 2009; L. Cortella, *Freedom and Nature. The Point of View of a Theory of Recognition*, in L. Ruggiu, I. Testa (eds.), *"I that is We, We that is I." Perspectives on Contemporary Hegel*, Brill, Leiden 2016, pp. 169-180. For a brilliant reading of Hegel as a philosopher who proposes a "living ontology" that is dynamic and capable of self-changing, see S. Achella, *Pensare la vita. Saggio su Hegel*, il Mulino, Bologna 2019. Although I do not explore the relationship between life and nature applied to recognition here, I think it could be a very promising path.

8   See A. Laitinen, *Interpersonal Recognition. A Response to Value or a Precondition of Personhood*, in "Inquiry", 45, 4, 2002, pp. 463-478.

9   For this critique, see L. McNay, *Against Recognition*, Polity, New York 2008; M.J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, Rowman & Littlefield, London & New York 2016.

The exemplification made through the concept of pathologies, even with all the internal differences of perspectives, suggests that recognition causes suffering when its social and ethical patterns are traced to an immediate natural scheme, such that naturalisation and ideology[10] coincide, because they imply a loss of reflection – of mediation – and because the structures of recognition become invisible and thus uncritically accepted. I will give a brief account of what is currently meant by 'social pathologies' and intersect this topic with the 'pathologies of recognition'. This is intended as an analysis of recognitional phenomena with regard to a theory of health or pathology, since the problem of the naturalisation of recognition seems to become most evident when such metaphors are used to describe and define experiences of social misrecognition.

Against this briefly sketched backdrop, I will propose my interpretation, starting from the definition provided by Honneth, who mentions the idea of social pathology in at least three relevant writings. In *Pathologies of the Social*,[11] he provides a definition of social pathology that is centred on the idea of self-realisation. Honneth later deploys this concept as a heuristic principle in *The Freedom's Right*, in which, at least according to some of his critics[12] he emphasises the idea of a fair, self-confirming society on whose basis we can discern deviations and pathologies. He recently revisits this notion in *The Diseases of Society*, where social pathologies are explicitly linked to recognition: "On the whole, we seem to be drawn to the conclusion that one can speak of a societal disease or pathology if a society in its institutional arrangement fails, according to its prevailing values, at one of the tasks it takes up

10   Särkelä equates ideology to artificial respiration in his article *Ideology as Artificial Respiration: Hegel on Stoicism, Skepticism, and Unhappy Consciousness*, in "Studies in Social and Political Thought", 2, 25, 2015, pp. 107-126. With this metaphor, he argues that ideology is a tool designed to keep a dying organism alive. I agree with him, since ideology can be used to block change. Here, however, I extend my criticism of ideology to include all the relations that contribute to creating a social order and fostering the interpretation of it as natural.

11   See A. Honneth*, Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy*, in D. Rasmussen (ed.), *The Handbook of Critical Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford 1996, pp. 369-396.

12   Freyenhagen, among others, highlights the 'reformism' implied in the definition of social pathologies proposed by *Freedom's Right*. He writes that social pathologies are considered by Honneth as "deviations from norms that are already embedded in the social fabric and that could be realized without fundamental changes to it" (F. Freyenhagen, *Honneth on Social Pathologies: A Critique*, in "Critical Horizons", 16, 2, 2015, pp. 131-152, 143).

within the functional cycles of socialization, processing of nature, and regulation of relations of recognition".[13]

This third point traces the relationship between misrecognition and the realm of social pathologies. If we explain misrecognition in terms of a pathology the defining criteria of which are fixed once and for all, we miss the possibility that recognition itself can be distorted, thereby exacerbating social and moral suffering by regarding some mediated relational dynamics as naturally immediate. In addition to such explicit references, however, many other contributions by Honneth have illuminated this concept as it connects to the dynamics of recognition. This perspective is, I argue, traceable in some of his writings, particularly those that address the issues of recognition as ideology and institutionalised self-realisation,[14] where he focuses on the social and moral suffering caused by an ideological use of recognition. This use can be considered an uncritical acceptance of criteria and frames that become progressively naturalised. In other words, a definition of recognition that is considered an absolute value risks being overlooked as the cause of social and ethical suffering. Regarding institutionalised self-realisation, Honneth acknowledges that, although society can foster or impede it, self-realisation itself as a normative criterion is not discussed; rather, it is accepted uncritically. Instead of referring to 'pathologies' of recognition, I prefer to refer to the 'wounds' of recognition and, in so doing, hope to show that recognition produces more injuries precisely when it is assimilated into a natural phenomenon and becomes essentially immediate and invisible. Its practices and institutions should thus be included and represent the realm of the 'ought to', since, if they are conflated with something natural, they are not capable of recognising the specificity of humanity in terms of its creative, critical stance. In this tension towards duty, human beings gain the ability to articulate their request for recognition as capable and creative beings without resigning to pre-established patterns, if and when those patterns blur the capacity for self-criticising norms, customs, ethical values, or social institutions.

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13   A. Honneth, *The Diseases of Society. Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept*, in "Social Research", 81, 3, 2014, pp. 683-703, 699.

14   See A. Honneth, *Recognition as Ideology*, in B. van den Brink, D. Owen (eds.), *Recognition and Power. Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 323-347; Id., *Organized Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Recognition*, in "European Journal of Social Theory" 7, 4, 2004, pp. 463-478.

This issue can be developed with the help of ethical considerations that explore the possibility of an indeterminate virtuality capable of actualising in unedited ways rather than limiting recognition to the realm of appearances. If it is true that misrecognition can provoke moral injuries and that recognition responds to a fundamental human need, it is even truer that what we recognise is fundamental as such: Form and content influence each other. When stabilised in patterns that are meant to be unchangeable, recognition misrecognises the most important feature of human beings: their capacity to discuss, critically negotiate, and transform society when it impedes the exercise of critique. Left open, the subject of recognition can be a vector that culminates not in the self-realisation of an individual alone, but in the self-transformation of society towards the common good. Recognition is realised only when it circulates among persons as a relational good, instead of blocking and reifying in fixed patterns, values, and forms of life. Respecting the capacity for critical endorsement, or for critical change, is the normative and anthropological kernel of recognition and can save it from the risk of ideology. It is worth noting that Zurn includes ideology among the forms of social pathologies, and Honneth endorses this view. Here, I propose to unmask the concept of social pathology based on recognitional relations as being ideological in itself, since it risks an excessive naturalisation of recognitional patterns. Zurn relates ideology to a lack of critical and reflexive attitudes among individuals, and defines the former as a kind of "second order disorders".[15] This definition has been criticised by Laitinen, who endorses an "encompassing view"[16] that is not limited to reflexive capacities. He argues that social pathologies can operate without critical capacities being affected and that one must recognise the social fabric of individual reflexive capacities. Ideology thus acts at many levels, not only by inhibiting the critical and reflexive capacities of the individual. Taking our cue from Laitinen, we could say that a fortiori recognitional relationships should be left open to critique and should be directed to the possibility and capacity of the other to express a view and have a voice.

What I recognise in the other is their virtuality, being respectful of their becoming and not objectifying. Consequently, forms of recognition can occur that do not recognise autonomy and reproduce suffering and discrimination. The model of pathology raises many problems, specifically because it seems to naturalise (in the sense of making too immediate or

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15   C. Zurn, *Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders*, in D. Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth. Critical Essays*, Brill, Leiden 2011, pp. 345-370.

16   A. Laitinen, *Social Pathologies, Reflexive Pathologies, and the Idea of Higher-Order Disorders*, cit., p. 60.

spontaneous) the process of recognition by considering this process as in-
herently and naturally good. Recognition should instead be located with-
in the realm of the duties of people towards one another, and it should
not be taken for granted because it represents a frame that can always be
discussed. Patterns of recognition established once and for all without ac-
counting for mutability leave themselves open to criticism, particularly to
criticisms that consider recognition an approach to losing the specificity
of the self or a reifying glance. Furthermore, recognition – precisely in
its being considered merely natural and immediate – can thus become an
ideological tool.[17] What I wanted to show here is that the risk of ideology
lies precisely in an 'immediatisation' of the patterns of recognition that
foregoes a critical and deliberate appropriation of what is considered nat-
ural. Recognitional practices that are assessed on a scale of normalcy and
pathology risk assimilation into phenomena with lives of their own, instead
of being products of personal and social relations.

2. *Recognizing the openness of autonomy*

To qualify as a duty, recognition must be insulated from at least two
opposing risks. First, it should not be considered an absolute standalone
principle; second, it should not be declined as a subjectivist stance. In a
nutshell, recognition can be uncritically accepted neither in its capacity as
an objective value nor in its status as entirely dependent upon the subject. It
should be a tool – a pattern allowing for the possibility of ethical responses
to life situations. These features can be summarised using the concepts of
'autonomy' and 'indeterminacy'. Recognition is consistent with respect[18]

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17 "Critical Horizons" *Special Issue*, 22, 1, 2021, is devoted to the French–Ger-
    man divide concerning the topic of recognition. Its title is *Recognition beyond
    French-German Divides: A Discussion with Axel Honneth* and is edited by M.
    Bankivski and D. Petherbridge. Moreover, as is known, Judith Butler was, at least
    initially, very critical of every form of recognition, considered as a form of subjec-
    tivation. This critique traces back to the French mistrust towards this category. See
    J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1997.
    Honneth and Butler have engaged in dialogue on several occasions. Last but not
    least, see A. Honneth, J. Butler (eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*, Columbia
    University Press, New York 2021. See also the above quoted work by L. McNay,
    Against Recognition, cit.
18 "Respect implies that the agent *recognizes* the object of his action as a kind of
    reality *deserving* that disposition. I must realize that I am a person and the other is
    a person, in order to respect myself or any other", R. Mordacci, *Recognition and*

for the other subject because we acknowledge the creativity and agency of someone who can reply. It goes without saying that this interpretation of recognition takes its cue from classical German philosophy, extending from Kant to Hegel via Fichte. I do not focus on those philosophers here; instead, I discuss the reading of Fichte provided by Axel Honneth, notably in his recent book, *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*:

> The subject can set goals that allow it to shape and reshape nature in accordance with its own ideas, but this decision for free, self-determined activity cannot enable the subject to acquire an adequate picture of its own act of will […] At this point in his deduction, Fichte fundamentally altered the framework of his own account by suddenly placing the subject among other subjects. In brief, as an observing philosopher, he asked how the subject's self-perception would change once suddenly faced with the presence of a similar being. Such an external subject encounters the subject by receiving a kind of "summons".[19]

Recognition is a matter of making room:

> A subject must know that the speaker addressing it has been willing to restrict his own freedom, for by summoning another subject and thus expecting a free reaction, it must be willing to make room for the interests of his addressees […] Fichte refers to the "summons" as an implicit expression of respect. In Fichte's view, calling upon someone to act always also means showing respect for that person, for the act of summoning presupposes that we refrain from asserting our own, private freedom.[20]

In this reconstruction, what counts as a moral principle is not recognised as such; rather, it is recognition of an entity that – while not necessarily in actual existence – can nonetheless exist, has existed, and can assume different and unpredictable shapes. Thus, recognition

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Respect for Persons: A Personalistic Interpretation of Kant's Categorical Imperative, in C. Rehmann-Sutter, M. Düwell, D. Mieth (eds), *Bioethics in Cultural Contexts. Reflections on Methods and Finitude*, Springer, Berlin 2006, pp. 129-143, p. 132. As for the connection between respect, recognition and autonomy, Mordacci writes: "And free will is what makes me an acting and responsible subject, and it also enables me to design, at least partially, my character as an individual" (p. 135), and "*active* respect means promoting the ends of persons" (p. 137).

19 A. Honneth, *Recognition. A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 115. See also A. Honneth, *Die transzendentale Notwendigkeit der Intersubjektivität*, in J.-G. Fichte, *Grundlage des Naturrechts*, (hrsg. J.-C. Merle), Akademie, Berlin 2001, pp. 63-80.

20 A. Honneth, *Recognition. A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*, cit., p. 117.

deals with leaving room for the other and of treating and trusting the other as being capable of ethical agency and recognition in turn. This plea for the recognition of something that does not exist and cannot be objectified once and for all does not necessarily clash with the Honnethian interpretation of the Hegelian suffering from indetermination, rather it protects determination against the risk of stasis. Transcendentality should be recovered in the sense of a condition of possibility rather than a sense of abstractness. In turn, this condition of the possibility of the non-dominative ethical gestures of recognition should be characterised by indeterminacy and openness to new possibilities. The bestower of recognition experiences it as a promise, whereas the receiver perceives it as an acknowledgment of the historical, narrative fabric of identity.

Critiques of indeterminacy are usually directed at abstractness. Freedom, so the arguments go, is not attainable if society does not provide the concrete conditions through which individuals can realise themselves. This critique faces the issue of recognition, since it is not enough to merely recognise that people are capable of freedom in principle if they can neither afford freedom nor access the material and symbolic conditions that render their agency possible and real. This kind of critique should be addressed to the social aspects of freedom that can impede or foster the participation of the individual in their freedom and in the construction of their sense of life. Nonetheless, there is a difference between acknowledging the presence of a strong interconnection between the material and symbolic aspects of human agency and fixing once and for all the social conditions, structures, and institutions within which freedom can be recognised and promoted in service of human flourishing and individual self-realisation. In the first case, the link between concrete and symbolic aspects is considered fundamental, but the ways in which it becomes real are not predetermined, and individuals retain their capacity to criticise social and moral structures; in the second case, the bond between social patterns of recognition and individual self-realisation seems too rigid.

In order to assess its ethical import, recognition should be directed towards an indeterminate[21] trait of personhood that could be associated with the indeterminate 'becoming', which includes under its umbrella

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21 My use of the expression 'indeterminate' is analogous to what Ikäheimo calls the "unconditional mode" of recognition. See H. Ikäheimo, *Conceptualizing Causes for Lack of Recognition: Capacities, Costs and Understanding*, cit.

the indefinite capacity for criticising those patterns and models, as well as for interpreting the past in light of the future. A too rigid bond tying social patterns, structures, and institutions to recognition – as if recognition could be possible only within those structures, which would constitute in themselves a sufficient guarantee for a life well lived – appears to be a deterministic, if not automatic, model of the relationship between the ethical self and society. Only a reconsideration of autonomy can serve as a criterion with which to (a) discern claims to recognition that aim to foster agency from those that exacerbate dependency, on both individual and social levels, and (b) promote immanent critical attitudes towards the context that can be reflectively endorsed or rejected in order to be transformed.

Some recognition relations subtly compel individuals to adapt to the dominant social and moral relations by playing on the striving for recognition, and they accentuate dependency because these individuals fail to do so. They can be corrected through a cross-consideration of recognition and autonomy, as Honneth does several times, as we will see later. If the former harms or prejudices the latter, it runs the risk of becoming an ideological tool or an unending process that leads people to live constantly 'outside of themselves', as Rousseau noted. Contrariwise, recognition relations are useful for interpreting autonomy from a relational viewpoint and for contextualising autonomous action. From this standpoint, Honneth and Anderson refer to 'recognitional autonomy' as a kind of autonomy the conditions of which lie in the acceptance, or hospitality, that the self receives from others on at least three levels – the same levels listed by Honneth in his theory of recognition.[22] Instead of interpreting this recognition as inclusion in a pre-established and fixed order of values, the recognition that fosters autonomy could be thought of as a promise or an act of trust towards those working to recognise themselves through the gaze of other(s). Autonomy is not possible without the context of relations that promote or impede the agency of the self. The fragility of agency should be preserved, both at the social and institutional levels, in terms of something that has the right to change and critically interpret the context, and not simply be adequate to it. A recognised and autonomous subject should be capable of perceiving and positioning the discrepancies between what is actually recognised as valuable and what could claim to

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22   See A. Honneth, J. Anderson, *Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice*, in J. Christman, J. Anderson (eds), *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism. New Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 127-149.

be recognised. Without the recognition of autonomy as virtuality, correcting institutions, social practices, and forms of life from an ethical viewpoint would be difficult.

The kind of autonomy at stake in recognition relations is not the autonomy meant as a competency that serves to maintain the order of society as a whole; rather, the kind of autonomy needed here is similar to that proposed by Cornelius Castoriadis:

> Autonomy is not closure, but rather opening: ontological opening, the possibility of going beyond the informational, cognitive, and organizational closure characteristic of self-constituting, but *heteronomous* beings. It is ontological opening, since to go beyond this closure signifies altering the already existing cognitive and organizational system, therefore constituting one's world and one's self according to the other's laws, therefore creating a new ontological eidos, another self in another world.[23]

Castoriadis develops his argument on the social and political level:

> Autonomy is, therefore, for us, at the social level, explicit self-institution, knowing itself as such. And this idea animates the political project of the instauration of an autonomous society […] Autonomy as objective: Yes, but is that enough? Autonomy is an objective that we want for itself – but also for something else. Without that, we fall back in Kantian formalism, as well as into its impasses. We will the autonomy of society – as well as of individuals – both for itself and in order to be able to make/do things. To make/do what? […] This what is related to contents, to substantive values – and this is what appears to be in crisis in the society in which we live. We are not seeing – or are seeing very little of – the emergence of new contents for people's lives, new orientations that would be synchronous with the tendency – which, actually, appears in many sectors of society – towards an autonomy, a liberation vis-à-vis simply inherited rules.[24]

Autonomy is understood as openness, as an explicit lucid awareness, and, as self-institution, it makes the link with recognition possible. There is an inextricable connection between recognition and autonomy, and they should be pursued in tandem. Recognition in a heteronomous context exacerbates dominative relations, and autonomy without recognition runs the risk of remaining a mere empty, abstract value without the possibility of concrete preservation or realisation. The type of recognition that possesses

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23   C. Castoriadis, *The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy*, in "Philosophy and Social Criticism", 20, 1/2, 1994, pp. 123-154, 145.
24   *Ibid.*, p. 150.

normative import should therefore be described as a recognition towards the indeterminateness of each individual and of their possibility of subverting the existing recognitional rules.[25]

Recognition is not always good, immediate, or reducible to a mere state of things. Autonomy allows for a distinction between dominative and liberating patterns of recognition. Recognitional relations form a kind of second nature, which cannot be considered always completely positive, since they can be reversed into "forms of naturalness and immediacy that are enemies of their own autonomy, signalling their 'placement' between quasi-natural relationships of domination and subjugation".[26] In the moral and ethical fields, it is neither possible nor desirable for recognition to become immediately and uncritically naturalised, since this would run the risk of eliminating its transformative potential. Were recognition to become a natural fact, it would be limited to certifying what exists, and it would never be capable of subverting existing forms of suffering, nor of discovering and creating values and norms that do not exist. Only by stepping back and leaving room for the other's way of responding to events can we recognise the moral potential in the other. Recognition is valuable only in the context of freedom as autonomy. Once again, according to Gregoratto and Ranchio,

> what is at stake in the struggle is *the possibility of non-identity*, that is, the questioning of those identities that heteronomically constitute the subject. *What should be recognised is the other in the possibility of displacement and disruption of every identity, and as a result, of the inversion of the power relationships*. Only within this kind of dynamic is it possible to recognise, take responsibility for, and realise all the necessary consequences of the constitutive vulnerability and negativity of the other.[27]

Autonomy and recognition are two poles of the same dynamic, aiming to preserve recognition from ideology. The risk that some forms of recognition may become ideology has been discussed and illustrated by Honneth:

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25 Recognition resides within this dualism between autonomy and heteronomy, as Gregoratto and Ranchio recently noted (see F. Gregoratto, F. Ranchio, *Il dolore del determinato. Seconda natura e riconoscimento tra Hegel, Honneth e Butler*, in "La società degli individui", n. 46, 2013/1, pp. 155-168. The title of their contribution plays on A. Honneth, *Suffering from Indeterminacy. An Attempt to Reactualization of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Van Gorcum, Assen 2000.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 157 (English translation by the author of this article). Here, they refer to Hegel's thought.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 168 (English translation by the author of this article).

The act of praising certain characteristics or abilities seems to have become a political instrument whose unspoken function consists in inserting individuals or social groups into existing structures of dominance by encouraging a positive self-image. Far from making a lasting contribution to the conditions of autonomy of the members of our society, social recognition appears merely to serve the creation of attitudes that conform to the dominant system.[28]

A reconsideration of the subject is clearly needed to acknowledge the ethical import of this cluster of categories. In particular, it is not possible to view the subject as a given entity; instead, it should be considered as one that becomes or realises itself through a narrative that can be more or less coherent. Recognising that there is always something that exceeds our operation of contouring the others is the transcendental feature of a recognition that can frame and inform all the concrete gestures of recognition that are not automatically positive, from either an ethical or social viewpoint.

The relational content of this exchange and the possibility of an ethical development are made possible thanks to a diachronic, rather than a synchronic, declination of the phenomena of recognition. I am recognised as being capable of leaving room for the other's autonomy, and I recognise others in the same sense. Even if the person with whom I am in a relation is as yet incapable of responding autonomously and freely, I should act *as if* they will acquire this capability, recover it, or even criticise it.

3. *Recognizing men and women as capable of co-authoring ethical and social frames*

This diachronic aspect of recognition as a moral principle pertains to historicity, situatedness, and narrativity. The latter means that recognition, to resist the objections of being an ideological tool, should account for

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28   A. Honneth, *Recognition as Ideology*, cit., p. 323. According to Honneth, the theory of recognition "seeks to draw attention to practices of humiliation or degradation that deprive subjects of a justified form of social recognition and thus of a decisive condition for the formation of their autonomy" (*ibid*., p. 325). Thus, even if he explicitly connects recognition and autonomy, he nonetheless defines ideology in a way that is not directly associated with recognizing and criticizing the frame: "But the deficiency by which we might recognize such ideologies could consist in the structural inability to ensure the material prerequisites for realizing new evaluative qualities. Thus, between the evaluative promise and its material fulfillment, an abyss opens up that is characteristic in the sense that the provision of the institutional prerequisites would no longer be reconciliable with the dominant social order" (*ibid*., p. 346).

the openness to the future as well as the possibility of changing the past that self-narratives imply. After establishing an explicit link between autonomy and recognition, we need to take a step further in order to clarify the meaning of a diachronic recognition of identities, values, and ends. This appeal to narrativity can help boost and dynamise recognitional patterns, in addition to acknowledging their ethical quality in terms of respect. The result is a sketch of a weak, formal anthropology with ever-present ethical implications. A considerable number of scholars have highlighted the inherent link between narratives and recognition, noting that giving an account of oneself and being the object of others' narratives are ways of recognising and being recognised.[29] What is at stake can be summarised in the following possibilities: (a) that of viewing oneself as the subject of new configurations and refigurations of their place in the world and of their direction; and (b) that this sort of recognition is grounded in an anthropology of creativity and freedom and that this should be considered a condition and an objective that can be reached within a lifetime and not only in a synchronic way.

First, I investigate the possibility of regarding the gesture of recognition as ethically relevant if directed towards the narrative thread of human existence. The diachronic extent of recognition once again testifies to the presence of a kind of recognition that does not reify or petrify the features of the subject recognised but that acknowledges that people are capable of liberating their agency towards the common good. This type of recognition requires temporality to be performed and fully enacted. In this interplay, what is at stake is respect for the possibility of change, which deserves a surplus of attention during its becoming. Temporalising the gesture of recognition by considering the self in its diachronicity means preserving the orientation and the unedited synthesis that the subject will be able to assume between projects and accidents, actions, and events. It means narrativising the act of recognition. This idea is partially included in Honneth's reflections on the morality of recognition:

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29 Ágnes Heller, among others, identifies at least two kinds of identity that can be associated with narratives and recognition: "One might distinguish two kinds of personal identity, better to say, personal identities, constructed from two different perspectives. One can be termed subjective or internal identity, the other objective or external identity" (Á. Heller, *Reflections on the Dynamics of Personal Identity in Modernity*, in Ead., *After Thoughts: Beyond the 'System'*, Brill, Leiden 2019, pp. 108-14, 108).

> The first step of developing a morality of recognition consists in the essential proof that the possibility of moral injuries follows from the intersubjectivity of the human life form: human beings are vulnerable in that specific manner we call "moral" because they owe identity to the construction of a practical self-relation that is, from the beginning, dependent upon the help and affirmation of other human beings. If a positive concept of morality is to be drawn from this anthropological premise, then it is obvious to assign the purpose of protecting against the dangers referred to. What is understood by the "moral point of view" is the network of attitudes that we have to adopt to protect human beings from injuries that spring from the communicative presuppositions of their self-relation.[30]

What Honneth refers to here as the "practical self-relation" constructed with the unavoidable help – or the obstacle – of others can be equated with the space of articulation that should be recognised as such and preserved. Moral obligations result from this possibility of injury that is as radical as it is interior and intimate. The place of self-recognition, always already mediated by others, is also the locale where wounds can be produced, as well as where the subject can irreversibly renounce their status of co-author – not only of their own meaning but also of the ethical and social frames through which they recognise themselves – recognising the subject as a means to acknowledge their identity as an author or, at least, a co-author of the meaning of the biographical experience. Practices of recognition *via* narratives thus leave the possibility of change open and do not adhere to pre-determined patterns; they are capable of recognising human creativity as well as human positioning in context, responding in new ways when the old ones cause suffering and pain. The link between recognition and narrativity is fully ethical, since it belongs to the realm of duties. Recognising self-articulation as a fundamental right is a duty and can be referred to respectfully: By virtue of being respected as capable of articulation, the individual is recognised as eligible to co-author their life, and the more this capacity is considered worthy of preservation, the more certain moral obligations derive from it. The need to preserve such a capacity is far from associated with a paternalistic stance, for the very reason that this capacity is undetermined and should remain so. Narratives can be viewed as useful tools for interpreting and directing one's own life, as well as a critical method for revising and positively altering the frames of recognition by discussing them and prefiguring other ways of effecting agency or acting ethically with and for others.

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30   A. Honneth, *Recognition and Moral Obligation*, in "Social Research", 1997, n. 1, pp. 16-35, 28-9.

Second, in order to sketch an anthropology based on formal frames of recognition, some features of narrativity as linked to creativity and freedom need to be further investigated. Recognising the other as a narrative co-author of their life with others means acknowledging (1) their sensitivity to interpretation, (2) their dependency on the trajectory[31] that they impress upon their life and that events can modify, and (3) their – at least virtual – capacity for changing the past. All these features reflect a notion of the human being as a creature who is exposed to historicity and events, one who is at the same time capable of responding with their own (narrative) resources to the uncertainty and apparent irreversibility of time. As suggested by Catriona Mackenzie, "Narrative self-interpretation is a response to this experience of change and fragmentation […] Narrative integration is dynamic, provisional and open to change and revision; and over time the patterns of coherence with a life can shift".[32] These anthropological features deserve recognition, which turns out to be the implicit, unavoidable frame of the sense of all human exchanges.

This anthropological thread treasures some features of narratives while abandoning others. In addition to evaluating the open teleology of narratives, their sensitivity to an interpretation that could be assimilated with a sort of dialogism – the transformative capacity, to use one of Bachtin's categories – distances itself from the idea of coherence at all costs, accepting ambiguity instead,[33] and values them as traces of freedom. As for coherence, this concept is easily regarded as an immediately normative one. Coherence can be a tool for shaping one's life and finding consonance between means and ends, but it cannot be assumed that every life is already coherent or that every life even automatically strives for coherence. Fragmented experiences, interrupted paths, and attempts to flourish should all be recognised as well, and their language should be preserved and acknowledged. If only coherent life narratives are recognised, ideology can even creep into this kind of recognition. Furthermore, coherence does not indicate goodness.

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31 The sensitivity to interpretation and the dependency on trajectories are listed by Karen Jones as features of narratives as applied to human life. See K. Jones, *How to Change the Past*, in K. Atkins, C. Mackenzie (ed.), *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, Routledge, New York 2010, pp. 269-288.

32 C. Mackenzie, *Introduction. Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, cit., pp. 1-28, 12.

33 Cf. A. Fabris, *Etica e ambiguità: Una filosofia della coerenza,* Morcelliana, Brescia 2020.

To close the circle, it may be worthwhile to reflect on the fact that, in his essay on social pathologies, Honneth refers to a "weak formal anthropology"[34] that "outlines the universal conditions of an unforced articulation of human life ideals".[35] In a few lines, he raises the problem and provides the solution to it. Pathologies of the social kind are – seemingly inevitably – rooted in contexts that can become invisible and too readily accepted as 'normal' and morally constraining. To avoid this outcome, Honneth proposes the identification of an ideal, albeit a weak and formal one, that can serve as a criterion with which to distinguish what is socially pathological from what is not. I agree with this proposal, and I do not consider that such a criterion should necessarily be external or fixed once and for all. Rather, recognition should be directed precisely towards the dynamism of a self-reflecting and autonomous society.

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34   A. Honneth, *Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy*, in D.M. Rasmussen (ed.), *The Handbook of Critical Theory*, cit., p. 392.
35   *Ibid.*, pp. 393-394.