

Between Normativism and Naturalism: Honneth on Social Pathology

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Axel Honneth has revitalized the notion of “social pathology” as a critical concept for social philosophy and Critical Theory; he has even defined the task of social philosophy in terms of pathology diagnosis and that of Critical Theory as a diagnosis and therapy of social pathology (Honneth 2007 & 2009). He has also used the idea of social pathology in his *magnum opus* (2014a) and studied it more widely as a critical tool in its own right (2014b).

Honneth’s ambition is to establish social philosophy as an evaluative approach to social reality not reducible to the perspectives of moral and political philosophy (Honneth 2007). Social philosophy is oriented towards a “deeper” layer of reality (Honneth 2014b, 791), a “higher” order of wrongs (Honneth 2014a, 86) or the “society itself” (Honneth 2014b, 684). This level, which marks the jurisdiction of a distinctively *social* philosophy, would not be reached by the vocabularies of moral and political philosophy. Diagnosing the characteristic evils at this level would require the vocabulary of “social pathologies”.

In what follows, we assume, for the sake of experiment, that social philosophy is, indeed, as Honneth argues, a critical enterprise of diagnosing and finding cures for social pathologies. We will, however, try to show that in different texts, Honneth has appealed to different conceptions of a social pathology, some of which are mutually incompatible. He has first of all understood it as a kind of “umbrella term” for social-philosophical wrongs, and, with qualifications, supported Christopher Zurn’s analysis of social pathologies as second-order disorders (sec 1). Secondly, Honneth has appealed to an organicistic conception of social pathologies as “diseases of society” (sec 2). Thirdly, he has – at least implicitly – given expression to an idea of social pathology as stagnation of social life (sec 3).

These views are not compatible, as they present rival views on a question we would like to call the “Euthyphro-dilemma of social philosophy.”¹ One question that any account of social pathology needs to address is namely: Is something pathological because it is wrong, or is it wrong because it is pathological?² The three views that Honneth seems to have held, answer this question differently. The first view holds that socially pervasive wrongs that meet certain further conditions count as pathologies: something is a social pathology because it fails to meet some pre-established normative ideal. We will call this view “social-philosophical normativism.” The other two views hold that diagnosing something as a social pathology sheds light to how it is wrong, or what the “wrong-making” features are: something is wrong because it is a social pathology. We will call such views “social-philosophical naturalism.” In this article we will, however, not attempt to defend either normativism or naturalism.³ Rather, we will reconstruct and assess these social-philosophical outlooks as they appear in Honneth’s recent works.⁴

1. Normativism

Honneth introduces the notion of social pathology with the intention to define the task and subject-matter of social philosophy. In his first essay on the topic, “The Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy” (2007), he hopes to show that social philosophy, a discipline struggling for

¹ The original dilemma in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro* concerned piety and the love of Gods: is something pious because Gods love it, or do Gods love it because it is pious? The terms are coextensive, and the question is about explanatory priority. The standard usage nowadays in moral philosophy concerns Divine Command theory of moral wrongness: is something morally wrong because God disapproves of it, or does God disapprove of it because it is independently morally wrong? The coextensive terms in a similar question for social philosophy are “socially pathological” and “socio-ethically wrong”. (For clarification of the kind of wrongness at stake, see the next footnote). Note that any subclass of social pathology, say, reification, would not be co-extensive with “socio-ethically wrong”, because something can be socio-ethically wrong for other reasons. But, a premise of the Honnethian approach to social philosophy as an analysis of social pathologies seems to be that “socially pathological” is indeed co-extensive with “socio-ethically wrong”. We thank two anonymous referees for comments on this.

² The relevant sort of wrongness for posing this question is not *moral* wrongness of individual actions, but what we call “socio-ethical wrongness” of larger social patterns, practices, processes, institutions or structures. Moral wrongness is about the moral impermissibility of individual actions, and about violations of “ought-to-do” –norms. The relevant kind of “socio-ethical” wrongness concerns more structural features: something that ought not be the case, and is unacceptable and socially criticizable. It is a stronger notion than mere “badness”. Calling something socially “bad” (while correct in that something of negative value is indeed at stake) does not quite capture the full normative force: e.g. pain is a bad thing, but sometimes it is acceptable to cause pain (e.g. in medical contexts); and typically in punishments, it is normatively acceptable to bring about something that is bad; and typically grief is a sort of appropriate suffering at a loss, so it would be inhumane to suggest that such suffering (a bad thing in itself) ought not to take place. By contrast, calling pathologies socially “wrong” captures the aspect that it is not merely bad, but violates some “ought-to-be”-norms. Now ought-to-be –norms are controversial, and we need not commit to that specific understanding of “socio-ethical wrongness” here, but it serves to illustrate the sense of wrongness at stake: social badness that is unacceptable and criticizable, and different from moral wrongness of individual actions. For stylistic reasons, we use “wrong” for short in the text. We thank two anonymous referees for comments on this.

³ For a naturalistic account of social philosophy by one of the authors see Särkelä 2018.

⁴ For a more general typology of conceptions of social pathology in the contemporary debate see Laitinen & Särkelä 2018.

survival in the tight spot between political philosophy and sociology, not only can look back at a grand tradition, but indeed still has a task to fulfill in contemporary society. This task is primarily to diagnose social pathologies (2007, 4). Social pathologies present criticizable societal processes that cannot be adequately assessed either by political or moral philosophy, which operate with the values of justice and legitimacy, nor by the contemporary professionalized sociology, which avoids ethical speculation altogether (Honneth 2007, 3-4). Therefore, the concept of social pathology has by no means a minor part to play in Honneth's scholarly project that seeks to integrate social ontology, normative analysis and empirical social research under the banner of "social philosophy." It is, indeed, the key category of his social philosophy, next to "recognition" – a concept that has attracted much wider scholarly attention in the last 25 years (see Deranty 2009; Fraser & Honneth 2003; Honneth 1995, Honneth 2010; Ikäheimo 2014; Ikäheimo & Laitinen, eds, 2011; Lysaker & Jakobsen, eds. 2015; McBride 2013, McNae 2008; Petherbridge 2013; Ricoeur 2005; Schmidt am Busch 2013; Schmidt am Busch & Zurn, eds, 2010; Siep et al, forthcoming; Taylor 1995; Thompson 2006; van den Brink & Owen, eds. 2007; Zurn 2015).

The central argument in Honneth's first essay on social pathologies is that they define the subject-matter of social philosophy and are to be conceived as "processes of social development" that become detrimental to a society's members' possibility of living a good life (2007, 4). From this negative claim about the good life, Honneth draws the conclusion that social philosophy relies upon *ethical* criteria; social philosophy differs from moral and political philosophy in that it, as a diagnosis of social pathologies, provides "an instance of reflection (*Reflexionsinstanz*), within which criteria for successful forms of social life are discussed" (4). As all deviation from such criteria are brought under the concept of social *pathology*, Honneth seems to take the naturalistic connotation of the good *life* seriously: Through the essay, Honneth consistently describes the social as a kind of life-process, which shows that the choice of the negative term "social pathology" is not arbitrary.

According to Honneth, then, two methodological commitments constitute social philosophy: a *formal conception of an ethics of the good life* and a *critical negativism of reflection on social life*. On the one hand, social philosophy emerges as a transformation of Aristotelian ethics following the invention of modern empirical science and the differentiation of state from society. Under these modern preconditions, under which its founding father Rousseau wrote his works, social philosophy could neither continue an Aristotelian line of inquiry about the good life and the state nor simply ignore ethical reflection about good life, as did the newly emerged disciplines of modern moral and political philosophy according to Honneth. Instead, ethical reflection had to be formalized and re-oriented towards a social life, which was no longer reducible to the political life of the state: "It was thus that social philosophy emerged as a representative of an ethical perspective in the unknown territory of the gradually emerging society" (33).

By means of the formal conception of ethics, then, social philosophy formalizes and re-orientes ethics towards an encompassing concept of the social.

On the other hand, by means of a critical negativism, social philosophy re-interprets the office of ethics as an “instance of reflection” in negativistic terms: Social philosophy does not enter the scene as a positive normative ethics, it instead evolves as a “critique of social circumstances felt to be alienated or meaningless, reified or even demented” (2007, 34). Instead of positive ends, social philosophy postulates negative beginnings – alienated subjects, reified relations, petrified practices, dead institutions, ill societies. All these more or less naturalistic negative evaluations Honneth subsumes under the umbrella term “social pathology.” By this concept, then, we are to grasp the unity of the tradition and the significance of the task of social philosophy.

In the same breath, however, he also claims that these negative evaluations of contemporary social life are dependent on some positive account of the conditions of human freedom: “we can only speak of a ‘pathology’ of social life in the true sense of the word if we have already made certain specific assumptions about how the conditions of human self-realization are in fact constituted” (34). In other words, social philosophy is negativistic in the sense that it, instead of postulating ethical ends, starts by diagnosing pathologies of contemporary social life, but, on the other hand, it cannot establish what is pathological without some positive account of the good life. How precisely the tension between a negativistic claim that is supposed to get off the ground without a positive ethics and the demand for a positive ethical account needed for meeting the negative claim is to be negotiated, has, according to Honneth’s narrative, never been quite clear to social philosophers. Therefore, he sees it as the task of his own approach to social pathology to resolve this problem of criterion. In this first essay, however, Honneth does not claim to be already resolving it. Initially, his aim is more modest: He seeks to study the past of social philosophy so as to fully articulate its present problem. Honneth is here, as a start, telling the story of how that task evolved, and thus contouring a future assignment.

Throughout the essay, Honneth is therefore on the lookout for different options of how to approach the problem of the normative criterion for establishing whether specific social developments might count as social pathologies. In the works of authors such as Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Lukács, Plessner, Horkheimer/Adorno, Arendt, Taylor and Habermas, he finds not only different criteria for diagnosing various social wrongs that he brings under the umbrella term “social pathology,” but also a whole array of different methodological options available to social philosophers for identifying the needed ethical criteria.

Therefore, Honneth seems, at least at first glance, to side with normativism regarding the social-philosophical Euthyphro dilemma: Some social development is not “wrong,” because it is pathological,

but “pathological,” because it is wrong. This tendency becomes apparent in his reading of Helmut Plessner – an apparently naturalistic social philosopher. Instead of interpreting Plessner as giving an account of the pathologies of the natural human form of life so as to establish social wrongs without resorting to arbitrary normative speculation (in which case the direction of social critique would, indeed, go from an ontologically contentful concept of social pathology to social wrongs), Honneth calls Plessner’s account a “supposedly non-normative path of justification” and treats the naturalistic account as the attempt to construe a criterion for social pathologies to be only thereafter applied to a diagnosis (in which case the direction of critique is reversed to proceed from normative criteria to social pathologies) (2007, 24).

Nevertheless, Honneth struggles to give a convincing account of the cogency of the concepts of pathology, diagnosis, and health for social philosophy:

“The concepts of ‘diagnosis’ and ‘pathology,’ both of which are closely linked to that about which social philosophy seeks to gain knowledge, stem from the realm of medicine. ‘Diagnosis’ is understood here as the precise detection and definition of an illness afflicting the human organism. The clinical notion of ‘health’ serves as a standard for the evaluation of abnormal symptoms – a notion that is often, for the sake of simplicity, regarded as consisting in the body’s ability to function. The concept of ‘pathology’ complements this concept of ‘diagnosis’: whereas ‘pathology’ originally indicated the theory of illnesses, it now mostly indicates an abnormal state of affairs. Pathology therefore represents precisely that organic aberration that is disclosed or defined in a diagnosis” (34).

The concept of pathology derives from the Greek word *παθολογία*, which again is made up out of *πάθος* meaning “disease,” “suffering” and “passion,” and *λόγος* meaning “word,” “meaning,” “reason” and “the study of.” Thus, there is an ambiguity to the word “pathology”: it signifies both the *disease* and the *science of disease*. Honneth seems to opt for the former use of the word, namely, to conceptualize “pathology” as that “organic aberration” which is “disclosed... in a diagnosis.”

Honneth clearly thinks of “pathology,” “disease” and “health” as concepts derived *from* medicine and then to be transferred *to* social critique. This might, however, not be quite accurate: Perhaps medicine as the evaluation of physical bodies and social critique as the evaluation of social life have not always been clearly distinguishable, that is, perhaps they have co-emerged, share a part of their histories, in which case the practice of pathology diagnosis would have evolved in evaluative practices, in which medicine and social critique were still undifferentiated. Then social pathology would be very much at home in social critique and “the act of transferring” (34) them from medicine needless, in which case the methodological

issues of pathology diagnosis would look very different (as we will see in the final section). The idea of a clear demarcation between the vocabularies of nature and society, physical bodies and social bodies, seems to coincide with a characteristically modern bifurcation of nature (Whitehead 1948; Dewey 2012; Latour 1993). For instance, the pre-Socratic physician Alcmaeon of Croton defines “disease” as a disequilibrium of forces and, as an example, he quotes “monarchy” (Dohrn-van Rossum 1978, 521).

In any case, Honneth is far from thinking that the transference of these concepts from medicine to social philosophy comes without difficulties. The gravest of these problems is the requirement of a “conception of normality related to social life as a whole” (Honneth 2007, 34). Whereas Honneth holds that social life is oriented to culturally contingent values and, hence, culturally mediated, such a criterion of social health must express universal conditions. A “paradigm of social normality” can according to Honneth only be established by a formal ethics that spells out the social conditions for the participants’ free self-actualization (34-35). This social-philosophical ethical reflection, arising from a negativistic ambition to diagnose the pathologies of its times, is formal in the sense that it refrains from postulating the ends of the participants’ self-actualization; instead, it merely inquires into the social conditions of human freedom (36). Honneth is convinced that such an idea of a formal ethics is implicit in all the negative evaluations he subsumes under “social pathology.”

“Without exception, these various negative concepts refer indirectly to social conditions that are taken to enable individuals to lead a fuller or better... life. Thus what constitutes the standard according to which social pathologies are evaluated is an ethical conception of social normality tailored to conditions that enable human self-realization” (35-36).

To sum up, Honneth has thus outlined the problem, which will orient his social-philosophical research: Social philosophy deals with social pathologies, i.e. social wrongs that cannot be adequately addressed as injustices, and all such diagnoses are subject to the methodological constraint of a formal ethics spelling out the conditions, under which a society’s members can feel assured to find sufficient possibilities for living a good or full life.⁵

In his second essay on social pathology written only a few years later, “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory” (Honneth 2009), Honneth uses the concept of social pathology

⁵ “Fullness of life” does not here stand for anything simply quantitative. (it would be absurd to think that, say, a planet which is filled with human beings is a better planet, because it is “fuller”). We thank an anonymous referee for requesting clarification on this. The metaphor of “fullness” in “full life”, is opposed to feelings of emptiness or the feeling that one is wasting one’s life, and stands for the qualitative phenomenon, of meaningfulness of life. This terminology of fullness is widely used in this sense, see e.g. Charles Taylor 2007.

to articulate the defining characteristics not of social philosophy in general, but of Frankfurt School Critical Theory in particular. In this essay, however, Honneth makes two crucial additions to the approach outlined in “Pathologies of the Social.”

The first addition consists in providing his readers with a closer look at how one should conceive of the criterion of social pathology that he in the former article merely contoured as the task of a “formal ethics” enabling “critical negativism.” In the social-philosophical tradition of the Frankfurt School Honneth catches sight of a promising blend of formal ethics and critical negativism. The argument is that the particular methodological strategy falling under a formal ethics preferred by the Frankfurt School consists in reconstructing a historically evolved and socially effective Reason. This concept of a rationality inherent in contemporary social practices should allow for an immanent critique of capitalism as its deformation.

“Critical Theory... insists on a mediation of theory and history in a concept of socially effective rationality. That is, the historical past should be understood from a practical point of view: as a process of development whose pathological deformation by capitalism may be overcome only by initiating a process of enlightenment among those involved. It is this working model of the intertwining of theory and history that grounds the unity of Critical Theory, despite its variety of voices...” (2009, 21).

Again, Honneth emphasizes the need for a social critique which is neither purely normative nor local but operates with the concept of social pathology in order to diagnose encompassing social wrongs. This specific form of immanent critique characteristic of the various voices of the Frankfurt School, Honneth reconstructs as a “social pathology of Reason.” It is interesting to note that Honneth now makes a more explicit use of “pathology” as both the science and the phenomenon of disease than might have been implied in the first essay. He now even uses the first, reflective sense of “pathology” in the title, hinting at Critical Theory’s practicing “social pathology of Reason” in the sense of a science of the deformations of a socially effective rationality. But “social pathology” still also denotes the object of this peculiar social-critical science; indeed, it constitutes the subject-matter of all Frankfurt School Critical Theory, past and present: “All of the expressions that the members [of the Frankfurt School]... use to characterize the given state of society arise from a social-theoretical vocabulary grounded in the basic distinction between ‘pathological’ and ‘intact, non-pathological’ relations” (2009, 22). Like in the first essay, “social pathology” appears as an umbrella term whose task it is to articulate an array of negative evaluations of contemporary social life. But now it also denotes the practice of social-philosophical critique.

Then how does the Frankfurt School further the project of diagnosing and curing social pathologies? How does it renegotiate the relationship between the two components of social philosophy, formal ethics

and critical negativism? The idea of a socially effective rationality constitutes an ethical claim, because it is based on the Hegelian thought that “each successful form of society is possible only through the maintenance of its most highly developed standard of rationality” (2009, 23). Societies are, then, reproductively and normatively coerced by an evolved Reason from a pragmatic point of view. Social pathologies should accordingly be identifiable in contrast to the criterion of a historically superior form of rationality. In other words, Honneth here conceives social pathology as a *deviation* from such a socially effective ideal: “Any deviation from the ideal outlined here must lead to a social pathology insofar as subjects are recognizably suffering from a loss of universal, communal ends” (2009, 24). Hence, also in this essay, Honneth leans heavily towards a social-philosophical normativism: A social development is to count as a social pathology if and only if it can be shown to constitute a deformation of a pre-established normative ideal of rationality.

Now, how should this rationality be understood? What is the Frankfurt School’s preferred formal ethics from which we are to expect a criterion for identifying social pathologies? Honneth’s answer has three parts. First, the deviations from this ideal are accompanied by a “regrettable loss of prospects for intersubjective self-actualization” (25). Frankfurt School Critical Theory represents the left-Hegelian legacy of articulating rationality in terms of *freedom* – a legacy that can be ascribed to most of the authors Honneth included in his narrative of social philosophy in the first essay as well. Second, this freedom has to be conceived as necessarily embodied in cooperative practice. Critical theorists hold that the self-actualizations of the members of society need to be intertwined and expressed in terms of a “common good” (26). In this sense, the concept of universal Reason implicates the idea of a common good, which must in principle be acceptable to the participants such that their individual self-actualizations express a cooperative freedom. Only then can the loss of rationality, which is a loss of the common good, be linked to individual suffering, since a deformation of the socially effective Reason must be experienced as restricted possibilities of self-actualization. Third, what is socially effective Reason must be historically reconstructable as superior to preceding forms of rationality and its deformations sociologically explainable as “de-thematization” of social wrongs in the public sphere. Therefore, Frankfurt School Critical Theory is committed to integrating empirical social research to the social-philosophical project (30).

The second important addition to Honneth’s account of social pathology found in this essay consists in the idea that the science of social pathology is not exhausted by the diagnosis of social pathology, but also has to include the *therapy* of a pathological society: The Frankfurt School’s “central representatives share not only the formal scheme of diagnosing capitalism as a set of social relations of blocked or distorted rationality but also the idea of the proper method of therapy” (36). This resembles John Dewey’s analogy between the social philosopher and the physician: According to Dewey both medicine and social

philosophy constitute “applied sciences” in the sense that they do not merely theorize about their object in order to produce knowledge that then, as if in an extra step, might be applied in order to transform the object, but the theory is construed precisely in and by transforming the object; both the physician and the social philosopher “diagnose” pathologies but also necessarily attempt to “cure” them, and just like the diagnosis perfects the cure, so the cure also perfects the diagnosis (Dewey 1973, 47-48; see also Särkelä 2017). Yet, Frankfurt School Critical Theory gives the idea a rationality-theoretical twist: The cure for the social pathology diagnosed by a critical theorist arises from the same Reason that is deformed by the societal organization. Here Honneth alludes to a Freudian figure of thought: Critical theorists hold that “social pathologies must always express themselves in a type of suffering that keeps alive the interest in the emancipatory power of reason” (Honneth 2009, 36).

To sum up, after having used the concept of social pathology primarily to denote the social wrongs diagnosed by social philosophy, Honneth, in his second essay on the topic, in giving a richer account of the kind of ethics involved in critical negativism, treats “social pathology” as also the science of disease and, moreover, includes the therapy of the illness into the enterprise. Therefore, a feature that distinguishes Frankfurt School Critical Theory from (some of the) other social philosophies, as interpreted in the first essay, is perhaps its explicit inclusion of *curing* into its critical practice: The science of pathology, then, participates at least to some degree in the healing of the pathology that provoked the diagnosis.

A further aspect of Honneth’s “normativism” is at play in his endorsement of Christopher Zurn’s interpretation of what social pathologies are in the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and in Honneth’s writings especially. Zurn (2011) suggests that social pathologies of all sorts, as discussed in the tradition of critical theory and by Honneth in particular, can be conceived as “second-order disorders.” These include pathologies of ideological recognition, maldistribution, invisibilisation, rationality distortions, reification and institutionalised self-realisation. What is at stake, in his view (or rather, in his interpretation of Honneth’s view), are “constitutive disconnects between first-order contents and second-order reflexive comprehension of those contents, where those disconnects are pervasive and socially caused” (Zurn 2011, 345-346).

Think of the myth of personal responsibility for poverty. This myth is ideological in that it fails to note the causes of poverty in social arrangements, and misattributes it to personal failures. The myth also makes the systematic arrangements between the rich and the poor seem natural and legitimate – it produces a failure to critically question whether some other, more egalitarian arrangement should prevail. There is thus a disconnect between what is really going on, and what is comprehended – second-order critical questioning is blocked. And this blockage is socially caused and pervasive.

Zurn's interpretation has been influential in recent debates. Honneth in *Freedom's Right* approvingly refers to Zurn's analysis of social pathology (Honneth 2014a, 86).⁶ This is to some extent surprising in that the "reflexive" structure of pathologies seems to fit "reflexive" freedom more closely, which for Honneth is not yet "social" freedom. While reflexive freedom takes place in the critical capacities of the individual, social freedom is, for Honneth, a matter of the individual being free in social roles. (Honneth, unlike Neuhausser (2000), does not think that the society itself can be the bearer of the property "freedom"). There can be social obstacles of both kinds of freedom, but reflective freedom is essentially about reflection, whereas social freedom is about actualization of individual's freedom in social roles (which may or may not include reflective thinking). Zurn's analysis may thus capture "reflexive pathologies," whereas social freedom should perhaps be accompanied by an account of *social* pathologies. This is the first of the three reasons why we think that Honneth's position might be better served by some rival conception of social pathology.

Secondly, there are some problems with Zurn's account itself (for a closer assessment of Zurn's claims, see Laitinen 2015 and Freyenhagen 2015). When Zurn goes through his cases, it becomes apparent that, as he presents them, they do not actually fit into his characterization of second-order disorders. What is the "first order" varies (is the social reality or the participants' first order experiences?) as well as the answer to what is socially caused (is it the first-order contents, experiences, or second-order reflexion? Or the disconnects between all or some of these?). One broad class of social phenomena, which Zurn's suggestion seemingly puts aside, are the cases where there's simply something wrong with the (first-order) social reality. It has features, which are unjust, undemocratic, cause suffering, prevent well-being, cause lack of freedom and autonomy, or prevent genuine solidarity. There can be oppression, misrecognition, exploitation, domination and brute coercion of various sorts even though the subjects can reflexively grasp these – the fault need not lie in the disconnect between reality and reflection, but in the social reality itself. (Of course, it may help the oppressor if the oppression is ideologically disguised.) One may also note that there are phenomena that go beyond the first and second orders, such as pre-emptive social *silencing* of criticism even when critical reflection takes place.

⁶ "In each case [Zurn] takes me to be dealing with second-order social disorders, because subjects take up false, inappropriate stances toward their relatively intact 'first-order' practices, habits and perceptions. I immediately agree to this surprising and extremely illuminating proposal in the case of my discussion of 'reification', 'invisibilisation', and 'unjust distribution'. These are indeed all higher-level hindrances on the adequate judgement, classification and articulation of everyday practices, yet I have trouble applying this proposal to my attempt to reformulate the concept of ideology in recognitional terms or determine the paradoxes of organised self-realisation. In these cases my descriptions oscillate between observations of first-order and second-order disorders." (Honneth 2011, 417).

Thirdly, it is not clear whether this understanding of pathologies would help define the task of social philosophy. On this approach, something is a social pathology, if it is somehow “social,” and wrong. Does this approach enable us to see the task of social philosophy in terms of diagnosis of social pathologies? It may, but only if it has a story about how social wrongs differ moral or political ones. It is a contested issue, but at least a negative characterization may be readily available: socio-ethical questions are not limited to morality in a narrow sense (that concerns how individuals ought to act), and social problems are not limited to political questions of democracy or legitimacy of governance – there are *social* wrongs or evils in addition to narrowly moral and political ones. There are for example, the pathologies mentioned by Zurn, or Charles Taylor’s (1991) three “malaises”: loss of meaning, eclipse of ends in face of rampant instrumental reason, and loss of freedom under “soft despotism”.

These problems with the second-order disorder –account suggest that there is still work to do for Honneth if he wants to defend a normativist reading of social pathologies and stick to the ideas of social philosophy as both diagnosing and curing, as highlighted in the earlier essays. As we will soon see, Honneth seems to have taken a different, naturalist, approach in a later essay. Before discussing that, it is still worth mentioning one conceptual distinction, that Honneth has made in his “normativist” texts. In *Freedom’s Right*, Honneth not only (mistakenly, as we believe) endorses Zurn’s second-order-disorder-view of social pathology, he also introduces a further class of social-philosophically significant wrongs: “social misdevelopments.”⁷ Like “social pathologies,” “social misdevelopments” are irreducible to wrongs identified by moral and political philosophy (Honneth 2014a).

The motivation behind *Freedom’s Right* is to carry out the reconstruction of a historically evolved Reason as expressed in the institutionalized practices of mutual recognition of modern democratic societies, as promised in “A Social Pathology of Reason.” In such societies, Honneth identifies three societal spheres where “social freedom” – a freedom realized in the social roles of cooperative practices – functions as a societally reproductive and normatively coercive value: personal relationships, the market and the political public sphere (Honneth 2014a, 131). Out of each of these value spheres, Honneth seeks to filter out the relevant form of mutual recognition and thus also its specific expression of social freedom. Practicing such a “normative reconstruction” of a historically evolved and socially effective Reason, Honneth faces, functionally differentiated in each value sphere, an ethical substance that he calls “the major stock of normative rules,” which can be extracted from “‘ideal-typical’ patterns of action” (128). Now, “social pathologies,” as Honneth understands them here, denote social wrongs caused by one-sided conceptions of freedom (moral and legal freedom): In this case, there are rules embedded in social practices (such as

⁷ Honneth does mention “social misdevelopments” also in the earlier essays, but he does not distinguish them from “social pathologies.”

law and morality) that have only a limited legitimacy; hence, in transcending those limits, these conceptions of freedom cause deformations of social practice – “social pathologies” (Honneth 2014a, Part II). “Social misdevelopments,” by contrast, denote social wrongs, which present “deviations” from that “major stock of normative rules,” that is, the ethical substance that in the course of the reconstruction shall prove itself to be a rational universal (128): In this case, then, the social wrongs present failures to meet the legitimate demands of social freedom embedded in the relevant value spheres. Whereas “social pathologies” are deformations of rationality systematically caused by incomplete conceptions of freedom (that is, moral and legal freedom), “social misdevelopments” present aberrations of an already socially effective Reason (that is, social freedom): “they are not ‘pathologies’ in the true sense, but rather anomalies whose sources must be sought elsewhere, not in the constitutive rules of the respective system of action” (129).

Both of these conceptions express social-philosophical normativism: both pathology and misdevelopment present failures to meet a rational criterion. Having noted them, we can now turn to Honneth’s naturalism. He will soon fundamentally revise the picture and leave both conceptions of social wrongs behind, and indeed change his whole approach from normativism to naturalism (without announcing that there has been a change in his view) In this section we have detailed four aspects in Honneth’s normativist approach (the first two essays on social philosophy and Frankfurt School, his Zurn-reception and the distinction between pathologies and misdevelopments). Let us now examine his turn to the approach we call naturalist.

2. Naturalism as Organicism

This turn eventually takes place in an essay entitled “The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept” (Honneth 2014b) published three years after the German original of *Freedom’s Right*. This last essay on social pathology marks a breach with Honneth’s earlier writings on the issue in many ways: First, the idea of a social pathology is now used to characterize neither a peculiar tradition of modern social philosophy dating back to Rousseau nor the underlying idea of Critical Theory, but instead it appeals to a much wider genus of social criticism. Honneth, namely, traces the idea of “diseases of society” back to antiquity: Already Plato’s *Republic* paved the way for a “mutual transferability of psychological and political vocabularies”; and the idea has since then “become endemic in all discourses on the forms of ideal and deteriorating collectives” (2014, 683). Correspondingly, the idea of social pathology seems to have grown in scope: It now has a more encompassing use than within the context

of a characteristically *modern* project of social philosophy (Honneth 2007) or its particular variant, Frankfurt School Critical Theory (Honneth 2009).

A second important novelty of the essay is its explicit turn to social-philosophical naturalism: Already in the first paragraph, the tradition from Plato is characterized as using the idea of social pathology “in order to draw normative conclusions about the principles of the just social constitution from well-organized psychic powers” (683). Observe the inversion of Honneth’s earlier answers to the social-philosophical Euthyphro-dilemma. Whereas he until now had been explicit about social philosophy’s necessity to first formulate a normative criterion for a subsequent judgment about something’s being pathological, he in “The Diseases of Society” uses a substantive ontology of the living body or the intact psyche to establish a normative judgement about social wrongs. Honneth’s last essay on social pathology thus inquires into the possibility of drawing normative conclusions from the idea of a pathological living body.

This turn to social-philosophical naturalism can also be observed in Honneth’s claim to now take the idea of a social pathology “not in a merely figurative sense but quite literally” (684). Although he in the first essay made efforts to articulate the significance of “pathology,” “diagnosis” and “health” for social critique, the transference problem was until now negotiated by representing “pathology” as a kind of metaphor for normative wrongs determined by a formal ethics. Now Honneth, by contrast, sets the stage for a literal understanding of the concept: “Social pathology” is no longer an umbrella term for an array of negative evaluations, but becomes a critical tool in its own right. And it is precisely the medical and naturalistic connotations of the idea of societal diseases that are supposed to enable its critical force. The underlying assumption of the use of such a medical and naturalistic vocabulary is, namely, that social entities are, indeed, of the kind that can truly fall ill. By this assumption, which Honneth seeks to articulate in the essay, the naturalistic vocabulary of social critique shall acquire the claim to an evaluative authority of its own.

Such a naturalistic social critique, however, demands two additional arguments that the more metaphorical use of social pathology could dispense with. First, the ontological commitment to some social entities’ being of the kind that can literally fall ill needs to be fulfilled by a social-ontological argument. Second, this implies spelling out to whom exactly the illness be attributed – the many persons, a social group, some institutions or the “society.” Let’s call the former “the ontological problem” and the latter “the attribution problem.” Honneth’s altogether surprising answer to both consists in a revitalization of social organicism.

Honneth lets the attribution problem take the lead. With both heroes of the essay, Freud and Alexander Mitscherlich, he now attributes social pathologies only to society itself, that is, not to its members nor to particular social groups. With regards to the ontological problem this leads him to conceptualize society

as “an entity *sui generis*” (688), that is, an entity to be determined by “independent categories” (689): “In order to speak of pathologies or diseases of social life, what is required is a transition to the independent organizational unit of society, which is irreducible to the sum of its individual members’ behavior” (689). If the disease is to be attributed only to “the society,” and not to its members, then this society, Honneth argues, must be conceptualized as categorially transcending its parts.⁸

Such an “entity *sui generis*,” a thing determinable only by “independent categories,” is in philosophy traditionally called a *substance*. Now, Honneth assumes in the text that the *kind* of substance that can be stricken with a disease is an *organism* (702-703). A great deal hangs, then, on how “organism” is understood. Organicism is one way to tackle that issue. Organicism holds that an organism is a self-maintaining substance that reproduces itself through its parts (called “organs”), while being irreducible to these parts. Such an ontology of the organism is already implied in Honneth’s claim early in the essay that the point of a social diagnosis lies in “measuring social pathology as the collapse of the societal faculty of reproduction” (693). Let’s have a closer look at how a social organicism emerges in Honneth’s struggle with the attribution problem and the ontological problem.

A consequence of the organicistic solution to the attribution problem is the abstraction of social pathology from individual social suffering.⁹ This is an important novelty in this essay, since it revises one of the key commitments of the earlier conception of social pathology. Indeed, Honneth now cuts the link between social pathology and individual experience of unfreedom that he passionately emphasized as a necessary component of Critical Theory in the early account. For instance, in “Pathologies of the Social,” Honneth maintained: “The reference point for all these attempts to establish a criterion for the normality of social relations is constituted by the social living conditions of individual subjects. Social forms of organization are seen as successful, ideal or ‘healthy’ if they allow individuals undistorted self-realization” (2007, 37). And in “A Social Pathology of Reason,” Honneth had been hopeful of a conceptual connection between social pathology and individual suffering; indeed, it was this very connection which would ensure that Critical Theorists find echo in a pathological society:

⁸ Even if Honneth does not clearly distinguish between these problems, it is important to note that there are two different arguments here: the ontological argument about society’s being the kind of entity that can fall ill does not by itself determine that the pathology is to be attributed solely to the society itself, as one could also treat other social entities, such as institutions and practices, as capable of pathology. Conversely, the solution to the attribution problem does not imply treating the society as an entity *sui generis*, as there are also other ontological options available, as will become clear below.

⁹ One question for any account of social pathology is whether a social pathology is a cumulative sum of socially caused pathologies of individuals, or whether it is the society that is ‘ill’ (and individual suffering merely its diagnostic guide) so that perhaps society can be ill without its members being ill. Or, even if a society cannot be ill when individuals are not, the question remains whether social pathology is nonetheless a distinct feature (there could be a sum of individual suffering, from other causes, without the society being in a pathological state). Interestingly, Honneth (2014b) explicitly regards ‘social pathology’ as a feature of a society, but in his construal of social freedom (2014a) he differs from Neuhaus (2000) in not regarding freedom as a feature of the society or social whole.

“Critical Theory presupposes that this subjectively experienced or objectively attributable suffering among the members of society must lead to that same desire for healing and liberation from social evils that the analyst must impute to his or her patients. [...] All the thinkers belonging to the inner circle of Critical Theory expect in their addressees a latent interest in rational explanation or interpretation, since only winning back an integral rationality can satisfy the desire for a liberation from suffering” (2009, 40).

Alas, in “The Diseases of Society,” Honneth explicitly decouples social pathology and individual suffering: Following the organicistic assumption that “society,” indeed, is a substance, that is, determinable solely by independent categories, “one ought hold on to the insight [...] that the societal abnormalities, which raise suspicion about something being pathological, can also consist of behavioral patterns that cause no individual suffering and thus also do not necessarily constitute psychic disorders” (2014b, 690-691). Honneth does not leave any room for relativizing this organicistic solution to the attribution problem in the essay: “diseases of society take place on a level set principally above that of the subjects” (700).

What, then, is Honneth’s solution to the ontological problem? In what sense can society literally fall ill and be stricken with a disease? Taking the idea of a social pathology literally now means for Honneth to conceptualize society as the kind of substance that can, indeed, fall ill. He assumes that such a substance must be an organism. Therefore, he maintains, society has to be understood as “analogous” (683, 700) with the organism. However, Honneth does not make entirely clear how the relationship between society and organism is to be understood. There are at least two ways to be a social organicist, let’s call them “light” and “full.” The question is this: Is it enough that one maintains that society is sufficiently *like* an organism for it to be diagnosed as healthy or ill, or must one claim that society *is* an organism? In the former case, the analogy would be drawn between *society* and *organism*, and these two entities would share enough structural similarities for social-philosophical naturalism to get off the ground. In the latter case, by contrast, the parallel would be between *the societal organism* and *the biological organism*, and these two entities would represent two distinct species of the genus “organism.”

The first, light version of organicism, would, of course, be slightly less extravagant, but not a very convincing conceptual strategy for taking the idea of a social pathology “literally” (684). It would beg the question as to why this analogy should present a superior method of social critique and a plausible model for conceptualizing society: What’s so literal about comparing society with an organism? The second, full version of organicism, by contrast, would arguably mount to an extravagant social ontology, but extravagance as such can hardly count as an argument for or against a philosophical claim. Yet, as a full

organicist, Honneth's talk of "analogy" (700) would not make much sense, as the commonality of the species (societal organism and biological organism) is articulated exhaustively by the characterization of the genus (organism), and the analogy would not add information. Anyhow, towards the end of the essay Honneth seems, indeed, to endorse full social organicism:

"The parallel to the living organism... is not arbitrary and cannot be avoided. One can only eventually speak of 'diseases of society' coherently and substantially enough if one represents the society as an organism in which the individual spheres or subsystems, thought of as organs, are cooperating so harmoniously that we can work out an idea of its unhindered, 'free' development" (701)

The parallel here is not drawn between society and organism but between the society, itself represented as an organism, and the living organism. Full social organicism need not hold that society is a biological organism; it holds that it is a societal organism. This parallel, however, means that society must be both *like* and *unlike* the biological organism. So in what sense is society like and in what sense unlike a "pre-social" organism? What are the *differentia specifica* of these two species of organism?

Society is a species of organism and, hence, "like" the biological organism, in that it constitutes a self-maintaining functional whole, which reproduces its structure through its parts and the parts through its structure, where the structure is conceptually irreducible to the parts (701-703). It is, however "unlike" the biological organism, yet still a societal organism, in that the reproductive ends of the societal whole are culturally mediated and, thus, culturally contingent: "in contrast to pre-human collectives, determining what makes a human society capable of survival always involves regarding the normative beliefs of its members, and these beliefs are subject to change and cultural variation" (697). The functional demands of a society cannot therefore be determined without taking its self-understanding into account. To a certain extent Honneth, then, sticks to his earlier claim that social life's values are culturally contingent.

Yet, Honneth distinguishes three functional requirements which are universal for all societal organisms: Such reproductive demands that every society has to meet are the shaping of inner nature, the shaping of outer nature and the regulation of interpersonal relations (698). Every human society needs to tackle these challenges to its self-maintenance by institutional arrangements.¹⁰ Honneth calls these aspects "functions of societal self-preservation" (698). Although these three functional imperatives are "always already cultural" (699), they are universal in the sense that every society must eventually meet them, in

¹⁰ Honneth leaves it open whether these three functional requirements coincide with the three value spheres of *Freedom's Right*. Perhaps the idea is that socialization is the functional requirement paradigmatically fulfilled by the family, working on external nature by the economy and the regulation of the relations of recognition by politics, although surely all three spheres are somehow engaged with all three functional requirements.

order to maintain itself as a society, in some culturally relative way. The organismic nature of society, as it were, gives these imperatives to every particular society, but how any particular society meets those demands is up to its culture: “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 within the functional cycles of socialization, processing of nature, and regulation of relations of recognition” (699).

However culturally contingent those societal values may be, there is a universal constant to be found, Honneth argues, that enables a naturalistic social critique: Pathologies are always accompanied by the experience of a loss of freedom. Yet, this experience cannot anymore, under the new organicistic commitments, be understood in terms of individual social suffering. Also at this point Honneth sticks firmly to his conception of society as a substance: The loss of freedom is not necessarily experienced by the members of society; instead, he proposes to understand the relevant freedom as the harmonious communication between institutional complexes, that is, between the societal organism’s organs.

Surely this new conception of social pathology marks a deviation from the Zurnian conception endorsed in *Freedom’s Right*. But at this point the “diseases of society” transcend also what Honneth in that book called “social misdevelopments”; “diseases of society” present no mere anomalies or failures to meet culturally defined ends, but indeed true pathologies (700). They are maladjustments between the three universal functional cycles of socialization, control of nature and regulation of interpersonal relations: society falls literally ill, Honneth claims, when these institutional spheres conflict (701). This is the case if the prevailing patterns of socialization, material production and social norms disable each other.

Honneth’s argument is that in such a case one can literally speak of social pathology, because here the societal organism’s freedom has been restricted. Such an intra-organismic and inter-organic distorted communication between institutional complexes, namely, constitutes an unsuccessful societal self-relation:

“What such frictions and tensions have in common with individual illnesses is that they display a troubled relationship of a subject to its self, whether this subject is a person or a society. And in the case of societies, the restriction of freedom, which belongs to our concept of “disease,” consists in these functional spheres’ mutually preventing each other from successfully developing...” (701).

If one wishes to pursue this line of organicistic social-philosophical inquiry, there will be some severe problems to address.¹¹ A first problem is that it seems counterproductive to frame a social-philosophical

¹¹ We have criticized social organicism more thoroughly in Laitinen & Särkelä 2018.

naturalism in organicistic terms. Honneth's turn to naturalism about social pathology does have the advantage that the concept of pathology is sharpened to a critical tool in its own right. However, an organicistic social ontology will be a high price to pay. If society is, indeed, conceptualized as a substance, the link to social suffering and to most of those phenomena that everyday social criticism assesses in naturalistic terms becomes a mystery. Organicism reaches its limits precisely where the work of social critique should begin: How can we map the connections of individual suffering, rigid social practices, mechanic habits, dead institutions, reified relations etc. in social life?

A further worry is that Honneth's organicism ends up maintaining the pathologies he originally set out to cure: Organicism constricts society into such a static shape that a social critique aiming at a "fuller or better life" (Honneth 2007, 36) becomes impossible. Organicism leaves the culturally contingent values of societies sacrosanct. The critical evaluation of reproductive ends of social life falls outside the picture, as the social pathologist restricts herself to assessing the harmoniousness of the maintenance of those values. However, if life is not only to maintain its form but to become "fuller or better," that is, to transform, those ends would need to be regarded as philosophically criticizable and socially mutable.

A third problem regards the implicit ontology of the organism underlying social organicism. Honneth maintains that society is a kind of substance that can fall ill, and that such a substance is a self-maintaining organism. Organicism, however, is based on an outdated picture of the purposively organized living being as an ideally planned organization where no part can fail without disturbing the whole. Nowadays we know that organisms are products of natural history and individual genesis, that is, of functional *transformation*; and we also know that organisms are much more plastic and redundant than organicism allows, they are, for instance, to a very large extent able to maintain themselves despite loss of organs (Hampe 2006, 210-211). Living beings are no longer studied as *substances* but *processes*. Hence, taking "social pathology" literally, does not commit the social pathologist to endorsing the *organicistic* conception of society as a substance. There are several naturalisms available for social pathologists who wish to pursue the study of a "literal" use of the concept. In fact, a naturalistic account of social pathology might, for instance, think of the organism in process-ontological terms, or focus on other natural processes that can fail (populations, habits or species), or just stick to *social* nature by, for example, conceptualizing "second nature" or "social life" more generally (Särkelä 2018; Testa 2017). Contrary to what Honneth (2014b, 701-702) believes, for social-philosophical naturalism, organicism is not obligatory.

3. A Naturalism of Fuller Life?

Let us end this article by hinting at a further way to conceptualize social philosophy and Critical Theory in terms of diagnosis and therapy of social pathologies – a way that can be found implicit in Honneth’s work. And, incidentally, this would constitute a social-philosophical naturalism without organicism, as it would operate with the idea of a growing and stagnating process of social *life*. While deterioration of *biological* life is a matter of failures of self-*reproduction*, deterioration of *social* life consists also in failures of self-*transformation*. Social formations that merely self-reproduce (and which are successful in terms of biological life, as “organisms”) may be pathological if critical self-transformation is blocked. Immanent criticism, including criticism via diagnosing pathologies, is part and parcel of a flourishing social life itself (for a more detailed account of this, see Särkelä 2018). To find this view implicit in Honneth’s texts will, however, require that we return to his very first essay on the topic with our faces set against organicism but with our eyes open to naturalism.¹²

Perhaps, then, Honneth’s early account of the “fuller or better life,” could be given such a naturalistic reading? Must that early essay be read as just a review of how the problem of the criterion evolved in social philosophy? Maybe it already contained the seed for a naturalistic solution to that problem? Indeed, what is remarkable about “Pathologies of the Social” is its form – namely, that it already operates as a science of social pathology: Honneth is here not only reconstructing various conceptions of social pathology, but also, in looking at those conceptions, *practicing social pathology*. It is perfectly possible to read it as the story of social life’s struggle with growth and stagnation, while striving for a “fuller or better life” by means of that “instance of reflection,” which Honneth calls “social philosophy.”

In fact, a characteristic of that essay is that he, in telling the history of social pathology, reconstructs every variation of the idea as a diagnosis emerging out of, and proposing a cure to, some pathology in social life. So Rousseau’s diagnosis of alienation emerges as a reaction to “a form of social life,” in which “the increasing pressure of economic and social competition” gives rise to “practices and orientations... that came to be founded... upon deception, dissembling, and jealousy” (Honneth 2007, 5), whence Rousseau maintains that “the most extreme individual autarchy” would fulfill “the presuppositions of a form of society that enables the self-realization of its members” (12-13). Hegel’s diagnosis is again a reaction to “social isolation, political apathy, and economic impoverishment” (11), and the proposed cure consists

¹² Whereas Honneth continues the organicist line of pathology diagnosis in the final chapter of his recent book on socialism (Honneth 2017), this second kind of naturalism is at least hinted at in the third chapter, where Honneth emphasizes an experimentalist understanding of social evolution.

in a “mutual obligation to a common good” (13). Marx, in turn, is diagnosed by Honneth to react to the rapid acceleration of “capitalist industrialization,” whose “consequences on the life-world could no longer be overlooked,” and so Marx needed to conceive labor as a process of “self-realization” (13). Nietzsche, finally, is in Honneth’s story seen to reflect on the nihilistic consequences of the “leveling tendencies” following the institutionalization of the “principle of equality” (16), which leads him to find cure in life-affirming values.

Here we find Honneth carefully diagnosing a process of social life striving for fuller ways by means of critically motivated ethical reflection. Importantly, as seen from this angle, Honneth anchors the pathology diagnoses of his predecessors as part and parcel of the social life he is diagnosing. Social life, then, is a form of life that mediates itself through the kind of ethical reflection that pathology diagnosis expresses. The diagnosis and therapy of social life is, as it were, a critical aspect of the going-on of social life. This could even be conceived as the greatest difference between social and other forms of life, such as the life-form of an organism (Särkelä 2018).

From this perspective, Honneth uses the concept of pathology on three reflective levels: On the first, we have the suffering of social living beings and the deterioration of social institutions etc. that constitute the objects of various diagnoses of social pathology. On the second, we have these different “sciences” of social pathology (Rousseau, Nietzsche etc.) that produce diagnoses of and cures for the pathological phenomena. On the third, there is, finally, Honneth’s own reconstruction of these conceptions that also operates as a science of social pathology by diagnosing the different conceptions as symptoms and cures of social pathologies and proposing the therapy of a formal ethics as the solution to the problem of criterion that is blocking the path of social philosophy.

Honneth, read in this way, treats already in the first essay “social pathology” as both the science and the phenomenon of social suffering. And the science of social pathology is part and parcel of the social life he is diagnosing. Social critique, operating in the characteristically social-philosophical way as a science of social pathology, is not something added to a societal organism that preserves its structure freely from it, but a medium of a distinctively social life-process that strives for growth. “Social pathology” can denote both the criticizable phenomenon and social life’s „instance of reflection“ (2007, 4). Therefore, also the title of the first essay, “Pathologies of the Social,” can be given a reflexive interpretation: It denotes both the subject-matter and the method of social philosophy.

This double-barreled use of the notion is not arbitrary: The science of social pathology not seldom becomes a phenomenon of social pathology: Rousseau’s, Marx’s and Nietzsche’s sciences of social pathology surely were problematic for the maintenance of prevalent societal values, and hence presented diseases of society in the sense of threats to societal self-preservation. So perhaps pathology as the

“organic aberration that is disclosed... in a diagnosis” (2007, 34), after all, is not only the disease but also the science of disease, in the sense of an ongoing social-critical inquiry always disclosing itself through its object. Such a “social pathology” is “critical” for the social order also in the sense, in which both the illness and the physician’s intervention can be critical for the state of the patient.

This conception of a critically self-reflecting process of social life would, indeed, avoid the problems of social organicism while still taking the naturalistic vocabulary of social critique literally. It clearly gives a naturalistic answer to the social-philosophical Euthyphro-dilemma, since it is the social pathology that discloses something as a social wrong. Striving for fuller or better life by means of a situational critical negativism, would re-enable radical critique, that is, criticism of the reproductive ends of society. Nothing commits a social-philosophical naturalism to substance ontology; on the contrary, there remains the option of an ontology of social processes (Renault 2015): Conceptualized as a life process, the object of social critique becomes radically transformable (Särkelä 2018, Ch. 5).

For further exploring this alternative naturalistic path of social philosophy, at least two requirements would need to be met. First, there is, again, the need for a new social ontological argument. Here Honneth namely embeds social philosophy as an “instance of reflection” within life: Social life *is* such that it reflects upon itself ethically in its ongoing movement. Social life must be able to be, like Heideggerian *Dasein*, a process, for which its own being is a question. Such a life cannot, however, be thought of as a merely self-preserving whole. It repels organicism. Instead, social life must be thought of as a mixture of the stable and the unstable, as organizing and dissolving, as self-maintaining and self-transforming (Särkelä 2018). But the alternative process ontology of social life would need to be articulated, if this naturalism is to be taken seriously as a “literal” account of social pathologies.

Second, also the conception of a formalized Aristotelian ethics might need to be revised. What might be needed is a move from a formalized Aristotelianism of good life to an Emersonian perfectionism of *transcending* standards of the good: “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness,” (Emerson 1983, p 261). Or in Alasdair MacIntyre’s (1985) view of the good life as a quest: the good life is a life spent in searching for the good life. The pathologist of “fuller or better life” would not anymore be looking merely at how a form of life lives up to its standards, that is, at how it enables individuals’ free self-actualization according to historically legitimate and institutionally embedded expectations of good life; she would also ask how these standards and expectations might be transcended. And that question would be a part of the ethical reflection involved in the science of social pathology operative in our social life, and thus a vital aspect of the social life itself.

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