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THE REIFICATION OF NON-HUMAN NATURE

Teea Kortetmäki

School of Management

University of Tampere

FI-33014 Tampereen yliopisto

Finland

Email: teea.kortetmaki@uta.fi

ABSTRACT

Reification is a concept of critical theory that denotes certain problematic, habitualised forms of objectification. In this article, I examine whether the concept can be applied in environmental philosophy and what value it has for environmental critical theory. I begin by introducing the concept and the two senses in which reification of the non-human world has been discussed in the literature: first, denoting the misrecognition of others' attitudes towards the natural world; and second, denoting a misconceived relationship between humans and their environment. After this, I introduce two potentially new subjects of reification: non-human animals and non-human nature. I also discuss two phenomena that could count as reification: industrial meat production and the commodification of ecological systems.

KEYWORDS

Reification, objectification, critical theory, nature, meat production

WHAT IS REIFICATION AND WHAT'S WRONG WITH IT?

The concept of reification was introduced into early twentieth-century Marxist philosophy by

Georg Lukács and became a central concept for describing and explaining the themes of class struggle and social critique, and problems of capitalist production and the exchange system. After this, the notion was almost forgotten in philosophy until Axel Honneth revived it as part of his work in contemporary critical theory (Honneth 2008).

Lukács (1971: 83) defines reification as a process in which certain entities or social relations take on the character of a thing: they are considered and treated merely as (quantifiable) things and take on an illusory objectivity that conceals how the reified entities or relations are of human origin.¹ Reification is a social pathology that alters the reifying subject's relationship to the world and deprives the reified entities of their qualitative properties. This also tends to influence how one approaches the reified entities: reified people are treated only as a means to some ends (ibid.) or are 'dehumanised' (Pitkin 1987: 277–278), for example as sources of profit in the capitalist system. Reified institutions, in turn, are considered as immutable and as necessary as the laws of nature: they cannot be otherwise (or if they can, it is not up to humans but some uncontrollable force to change them). This prevents the possibility of social change and the empowerment of individuals whose freedom is restricted by the prevailing institutional arrangements. These ideas form the core of the phenomenon of reification. Since Lukács, the notion has been interpreted and applied in modified ways that are discussed later in this paper.

Reification is not identical to objectification (Lukács 1971: 84; see also Honneth 2008; Hull 2013; Testa 2015).² Objectification has multiple meanings and it may be positive, neutral or negative; reification represents a particular, negative type of objectification. Some amount of objectification is a necessary and inseparable part of human life (Lukács 1971: 84), and in some spheres of social life (in certain scientific studies, for example) an objectifying and detaching stance is legitimate (Honneth 2008: 28; see also Hayward 1997). This kind of objectification, by which humans synthesise and organise the world into cognisable things, is

principally neutral or positive. There is also another conventional sense of objectification that is negative yet different from reification. In this sense, objectification characterises the intentional instrumentalisation of other persons such that it denies their autonomy and subjectivity (Nussbaum 1995). This phenomenon is different from reification for the following reasons. First, it involves a deliberate decision to treat another person in a way that denies his or her autonomy, whereas reification does not involve such deliberateness. A second, related objectification in Nussbaum's sense is intentional and hence morally blameworthy, whereas reification is habitual and unintentional, and does not involve direct blameworthiness (Hull 2013: 58–62).³ The main feature that distinguishes reification from the morally blameworthy objectification, then, is that reification has become habitualised to the extent of becoming 'second nature', a natural and normal practice in society (Lukács 1971).⁴

Reification may concern persons, social constructions such as institutions or the non-human part of the world (Lukács 1971; see also Honneth 2008; Ikäheimo 2016). Lukács discusses reification in multiple realms. For him, the capitalist exchange system necessarily places people in a disempowered stance where humans regard their labour merely as 'an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour' (Lukács 1971: 100), each other as the objects of profitable transactions, and themselves as resources in the capitalist system (Lukács 1971: 86–92).

Honneth, in turn, focuses on the inter- and intrapersonal realms of reification. He defines reification as forgetfulness of recognition. It occurs when humans forget the 'antecedent' recognitional stance towards others in a way that creates a tendency to perceive other persons as mere objects: the feeling of empathetic connection and involvedness towards others is lost (Honneth 2008: 56–57). In addition to social philosophy, sociological literature addresses reification in its institutional realm, denoting the misapprehension of human activity, humanly engendered products and institutions as 'given' and unchangeable, rather

than socially constructed and socially transformable (Pitkin 1987).

Reification constitutes an epistemic category mistake for it involves misapprehension that something is a 'mere thing' though it is not; yet there is more that makes reification subject to social critique. Interpersonal reification tends to result in morally inappropriate patterns of behaviour towards fellow humans (whether the persons conducting reification can be blamed for it or not) and is a regrettable phenomenon. In the institutional realm, problems are of course different because institutions are not moral subjects that can experience morally inappropriate treatment. However, the reification of institutions makes people feel powerless and helpless to influence the conditions that affect their lives, and so it impedes transformative action (Hull 2013; Pitkin 1987). Reification also weakens autonomy, either of reified entities and/or of those who conduct reifying practices. As one of the aims of critical theory has been to provide a contemporary social critique that promotes the empowerment of people, reification is an interesting notion in this respect.

The emerging literature on interpersonal reification and self-reification is diverse.⁵ In contrast, the reification of non-human nature or the humanised environment has been addressed in only a few texts, although it has been present 'in the background', visible in brief remarks by various authors. The lack of discussion of the reification of nature is surprising for several reasons. First, there has been increasing interest in environmental philosophy and political theory influenced by critical theory, and one might expect that in this field the concept of reification would have gained more attention. Secondly, especially in the first generation of the Frankfurt School, authors built much on the domination thesis that views the domination of nature and the domination of humans as closely connected and associated with rational instrumentalisation (e.g. Adorno 2006: 16; Horkheimer 1947: 105), an argument that comes close to the idea of reification. Thirdly, at least some parts of Lukács's work on reification are relevant to environmental struggles today (Feenberg 2015). The problem of

reification bears close resemblance to the common critique about the inappropriate instrumentalisation of nature and ignorance about the integrity and vulnerability of the ecological world. This evokes an interesting question about whether the notion of reification is applicable to environmental and ecological concerns.

REIFICATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

There are three potential (and partly overlapping) realms of reification that may be relevant to environmental philosophy and ethics: first, the environment (the realm of the natural world that is constructed or transformed by humans); second, non-human animals; and third, non-human nature. In his revival of the notion of reification, Axel Honneth (2008: 61–63) speaks about the reification of non-human entities as a derivative or indirect form of reification. Later, Steven Vogel (2015, 2016) and Simon Hailwood (2015) have incorporated the notion of reification into environmental philosophy regarding the reification of the environment. Elsewhere, reification has been linked to environmental or non-human issues in passing remarks concerning the reification of climate change (Hull 2013: 67) and how environmental movements constitute ‘dereifying’ activism (Feenberg 2015: 500–501). Interestingly, Judith Butler (2008: 99–100) has also provided a short yet sharp criticism about the anthropomorphism of Lukács.

Among the three potential realms of environmentally relevant reification, the existing literature has mainly addressed the reification of the environment, where the issue at stake is the relationship between humans and their surroundings and the human-madness of the environment. I will next introduce and discuss the existing literature on reification and the environment. After that, I will address two other potential realms of reification that deserve attention (non-human animals and non-human nature).

Honneth and the derivative reification of nature

Axel Honneth, who modifies the notion of reification in a cognitivist direction, associates reification with a model of interpersonal recognition and suggests that reification denotes ‘forgetfulness of recognition’ (of a person’s personhood) (Honneth 2008: xx). Reification means a tendency to perceive other persons as mere objects, which causes a forgetting of their personhood, lacking the feeling of connection and dismissing the appropriate way to approach them (ibid.: 56–59).⁶ For Honneth, reification primarily concerns relations with other persons and oneself, but nature (Honneth does not distinguish between the environment and the rest of the natural world here) can also be reified – though only in a derivative sense. Honneth notes that when we recognise other persons, we must also recognise their conceptions and feelings about the non-human world, and a failure to do this reifies nature. This is reification only in an indirect sense because it is actually the attitudes and meanings of other persons that are ‘forgotten’, rather than nature itself. Honneth (ibid.: 64) argues that the reification of persons is a violation of the preconditions of our cognitive relationship to other persons, but taking an objectifying stance towards nature does not (in his view) violate any preconditions of our cognitive relationship with nature.

As Hailwood (2015: 87–98) notes, Honneth views nature as a vehicle for interpersonal recognition. From the environmental viewpoint, Honneth’s approach is problematic for several reasons. Perhaps the greatest problem is that, for Honneth, the reification of nature occurs when we are not aware ‘that these [non-human] objects possess a multiplicity of existential meanings for the people around us’ (Honneth 2008: 63). To not reify other persons, I must then recognise their subjective conceptions about non-human objects. Yet, what if those people already relate to the non-human world in a merely instrumentalising way? How

should I relate to those instrumentalising or hostile feelings? There is also another related problem noted by Hailwood (2015: 98): any concern for nature represents reification when it is articulated independently of human-related concerns. As a result, the Honnethian account of reification may indeed promote anthropocentric instrumentalism in a concealed way. Only the existing attitudes of other people towards nature matter, and they do so regardless of their epistemic or ontological appropriateness. It also seems that Honneth finds this a perfectly normal way to approach these matters. Overall, Honneth's account does not appear very useful for discussing environmental concerns due to its emphasis on personhood and the cognitive aspects of interpersonal relations.

Hailwood (ibid.: 100–101) suggests that Honneth's passages on the reification of nature may, however, be plausibly interpreted as denoting more precisely the reification of landscape (the 'humanised' part of the natural world; the environment in my terms). Reification occurs when people neglect the role of their fellow humans and themselves in constructing and modifying those landscapes. This results in a belief that those surroundings are 'not one's business', or that one is not involved in constructing or transforming them. Careless littering or spoiling one's surroundings (that appear merely as a neutral background for human activities) and the denial of human responsibility for climate change are examples of practices that relate to the reification of landscape.

Vogel and reification as misapprehension of our relationship with the environment

Steven Vogel connects reification to environmental philosophy in a way that remains true to the Lukácsian origins of reification. Vogel argues that the equation of the environment with nature (the latter denoting everything that is not the product of human acts of making), done by many environmentalists, 'starts to look like a symptom of reification' (Vogel 2016: 157).⁷

He follows Lukács in defining reification as a process where human-made things appear to humans as fixed items, hiding the fact that humans were needed for bringing those things into existence. Lukács was concerned about reification in the context of institutions and of economic relations; Vogel applies the notion further and claims that the environment, including all forms of life that inhabit this planet, is built by humans both socially and materially. A view of the environment as something not human-made, as independent of us instead of a result of our making, involves reification: it fails to acknowledge the human role in creating that world and prevents humans from taking real responsibility for environmental problems (Vogel 2015, 2016). The emphasis on the builtness and sociality of the environment leads Vogel to call for post-naturalist environmental philosophy. In his view, acknowledging the human impact on the world means accepting that it is human to ‘think like a mall’, and this involves giving up the normative idea that we should minimise human impact on non-human nature (or ‘think like a mountain’). We need to accept that the environment is nowadays built by us and decide to build it better (Vogel 2015: 129–166).

Climate change exemplifies this kind of reification. Climate change is reified when it is taken as a ‘mere natural happening’ (Hull 2013: 67; Hailwood 2015: 101), although it is a result of human action and could be mitigated by humans. The human relationship with the environment is reified if humans forget or deny their influence on it and view the consequences of human actions as inevitable as the consequences of natural laws. The reification of human–environment relations is akin to the reification of social structures: both deny the human choice and agency in constructing the world.⁸ This manifests an epistemic (or in Vogel’s view ontological) category mistake that is characteristic of reification. Also typical of reification, the mistaken view might be more habitual than deliberate (I would say it is about ‘forgetting’ the human impact on the environment). This forecloses the possibility of assessing the reified practices critically because they are conceived as ‘natural happenings’

(Hull 2013: 66–68), which rejects human responsibility for them. Acknowledging the human-madness of the environment is both an ontological and a moral matter (Vogel 2015: 164). Environmental movements might be a dereifying force in society and promote the acknowledgement urged by Vogel: they contest relations that have been assumed immutable, such as the ‘imperatives of technology’ (Feenberg 2015: 500–501). Dereification breaks the illusory thing-hood and recovers the contingency and changeability of social structures or relations.

Vogel’s definition of the reification of the environment is akin to what Hailwood calls the reification of landscape. The crucial difference, though, is Vogel’s post-naturalism: for Vogel, the whole world is nowadays essentially human-made, everything is part of the environment, and there is no non-human nature. This excessive social constructionism is unacceptable for many environmental thinkers, and it falls prey to the criticism that a view of the world as already humanised supports the domination of nature as unrestricted transformation (Hailwood 2015: 133). One can accept the critique of the reification of the environment without committing to Vogel’s excessive social constructionism: Hailwood’s discussion about reification of landscape exemplifies this. In my opinion, this ‘mitigated’ view about the reification of the environment or landscape constitutes a convincing point of criticism that calls for further research about the ways in which prevalent societal structures produce and maintain a tendency for such ‘forgetfulness’. Even this framing, however, passes over a further question that interests those who agree on the existence of non-human nature: can one speak of the reification of non-human nature? In what follows, I will address this question regarding two issues: the reification of non-human yet ‘humanised’ animals and of non-human nature.

REIFICATION AND DE-ANIMALISED ANIMALS

Non-human animals – hereafter, simply animals – at least the sentient ones, are individual beings with their own life and experience of that life as something. They also engage in interactive relations with other beings. The difference between humans and other animals is one of degree rather than kind. For these reasons, I consider the reification of animals beginning from discussions that concern reification of other human beings and intersubjective relations.

Affective change plays a central role in the reification of human beings: reification involves the loss of empathetic engagement towards the reified subject (Lukács 1971; Honneth 2008). Lukács describes how subjects involved in capitalist commodity exchange begin to regard each other merely as profitable units of economic exchange. In the case of modern intensive animal farming, the customary human relation to farmed animals significantly resembles Lukács's description of the reification of humans in the economic exchange system. The relation could also be described in Honneth's terms: as a tendency to regard others (here animals) merely as objects, without feelings of connection or empathetic engagement (Honneth 2008: 57–58). Indeed, our treatment of non-human animals is an evident instance of how privileging an instrumental reason achieves a domination of subjects through reification (Cavaliere 2005: 54–68). Unfortunately, Cavaliere does not discuss in any detail what he means by reification, but rather treats the term as self-explanatory.

Intensive and industrialised meat production reduces animals to commodities and quantitative units in the food system. They are objectified and situated within the framework of production. This results in a cognitive process of de-animalisation, where the sight of animals as animals is lost and they become viewed as mere production units (Harfeld et al. 2016: 408–409; Pachirat 2011). Animal welfare might be a concern for some actors in the food business, but it is approached through a productionist and functionalist framework,

which implies minor rather than transformative improvements that do not question the production system itself. Moreover, increased animal welfare is often linked in this discourse to increased productivity, product surplus value or some other benefit for humans. Welfare improvements are made in the first place to increase consumer satisfaction or profit rather than for the sake of the animals (who are no longer viewed as animals).

The above-described stance is reifying for the following reasons. First, it represents a category mistake of conceiving production animals as if they were merely products or a resource mass to be turned into food. De-animalisation results in illusory thing-likeness that reduces animals to numb and lifeless things (cf. Honneth 2008: 19) and deprives them of other characteristics. Secondly, as in the case of persons, reification precludes the possibility for empathetic engagement towards ‘production animals’, which has implications for their treatment. Thirdly and relatedly, reification forecloses the possibility of critically examining production practices in a transformative way, since the practices have become deeply rooted: it is normal and ‘natural’ to use the methods of industrialised mass production to ensure that humans get affordable meat to eat. Fourth, due to this normalisation, de-animalisation is unintentional rather than deliberate for the general public.⁹ Provided that animals can be considered as beings that can be recognised, the praxis of objectification present in meat production also manifests the ‘forgetfulness of recognition’ that constitutes the core of reification for Honneth (2008).

The ‘habituality’ that is central to reification is deep-rooted in the case of industrial meat production, whose conditions of existence and economic significance maintain and reproduce de-animalisation in ways that prevent ‘re-animalisation’. It is difficult to see animals as animals, with their complex qualitative characteristics, when they are ‘hidden’ in the production system. This hiddenness is created both materially and socially. In material terms, the production system prevents animals from expressing complex behaviour that would

make them appear more animal-like (Harteld et al. 2016: 414).¹⁰ Socially, a reifying and detaching stance is maintained with the language that approaches animal-based food products via ‘mass terms’ (pork, beef) rather than words that would refer to the individual and distinct character of animals (Adams 2015). Though these terms existed before mass production and do not conceptually necessitate mass production, they essentially support the detachment of humans from ‘production animals’, which strengthens the perceived normality of prevailing practices.

The industrialised meat production system is ossified in the industrialised world’s food system to the extent that it obscures from people the ethical concerns that could otherwise be relevant to their deliberations, and this obscurity is one of the problems of reification (Hull 2013: 68). The fundamental character of animals, or what Hailwood (2015: 134–135) calls the ‘remainder’ to denote the characteristics that are left outside the meaning an animal has in relation to human-oriented uses, is concealed by the production system that ‘hides’ that animal.¹¹ This, in turn, shuts out the possibility for a transformative critical examination of the system.

NON-HUMAN NATURE AND REIFICATION

Non-human nature represents the third potential (environmentally relevant) realm of reification. By non-human nature (hereafter also nature) I refer to those parts of the natural world – its living organisms, ecological systems and ecological or biogeochemical processes – whose existence has taken place or could do so without human impact, even if human actions affect them.¹² There is no such thing as ‘pristine nature’ that is entirely free from human handprints: climate change alone disproves such an idea. A large part of the world, however, exists or could exist on a non-anthropogenic basis; some of it is near to us, and

some of it exists at a greater distance from everyday human lives and may never be visited by humans. This non-human nature is my concern in this section. I begin by describing how humans turn parts of non-human nature into humanised landscape for human use. This transformation, which occurs largely through social rationalisation, does not necessarily count as reification but may become such.

Social rationalisation is based on the calculability of things and on the institutionalisation of this calculating, technical rationality. Lukács (1971) argued that capitalism makes social rationalisation become the governing principle of the whole society. Although Lukács's critique of the totalising force of capitalism is idealistic, his point about the large-scale extension of calculability into various domains of life in the name of 'morally neutral' rationalisation is interesting. When non-human entities are regarded as calculable resources for human utilisation, they may be 'thingified', reduced to a means to human ends or from 'nature-in-itself' to 'resource-for-us(e)'.¹³ Such reductionism was criticised by the first-generation Frankfurt School thinkers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, albeit they did not use the term reification (Biro 2016). Due to instrumental reason, nature becomes conceived as a mere tool of humanity (Horkheimer 1947: 108). The domination thesis of the first-generation Frankfurt School theorists linked the domination of humans and domination of nature: both resulted from instrumental rationalisation (Adorno 2006; Horkheimer 1947). The connection between instrumental rationalisation and reification is noted by Andrew Biro:

while instrumental rationality is obviously useful, it also has some disturbing implications: the process of reification that abstracts from things only what is useful to the task at hand ... can be seen in how we treat non-human nature, other humans, and our own selves. (Biro 2016: 91)

Instrumental rationalisation reduces a non-human entity (from an entity-in-itself) to merely an entity-for-use, which significantly narrows down how the given entity is conceived and approached. This process may count as reification, yet further conditions must be discussed before making that claim. Another question concerns who conducts reification and to what extent. My claim here is that reification is an existing phenomenon in contemporary Western societies, yet the extent and structural explanation of that phenomenon require further investigation.¹⁴

Instrumental rationalisation promotes the commodification of nature,¹⁵ which is an interesting candidate for further investigation at this point. The commodification of nature has led to a situation where the ecological world is increasingly appropriated by the domain of economic interactions and transformed into humanised landscape. Social theorists, including the Frankfurt School, had already begun to worry about the effects of the commodification of nature by the mid 1900s. Karl Polanyi remarked that commodifying land as property is mistaken in two ways: it involves the illusion of the possibility of detaching land from ecological relationships, and it squeezes out the meaning attributed to land and threatens the human values and experiences relating to it as something more than a commodity (Polanyi 2001: 187–200; see also Meyer 2005). Commodification is a ‘fiction’ that twists the perception of the environment and reduces it to an ‘item-for-use’ (Vatn 2000). Even the commodification of protection might be suspicious: the corporate-led restoration of nature appropriates an image of nature for capital interests, and it seems that such restoration projects encourage a view in which nature is viewed as ‘just a pleasant background to consumption’ (Light and Higgs 1996: 242). Similar themes have been emphasised in the discourse of ecological injustice and the misrecognition of nature, which is instantiated for example in a failure to recognise the integrity or agency of non-human nature (Hailwood 2015; Schlosberg 2007).¹⁶ The commodification of nature, at least in a fully fledged form,

makes nature into a mere resource and detaches it from the qualitative attributes beyond the commodity meaning. Hailwood (2015: 143–144) calls this the misrecognition of nature because it neglects the consideration of the non-human in other terms than its potential place in the humanised landscape.

Two waves of the commodification of nature can be identified during the dominant period of the prevailing capitalist system in Western societies.¹⁷ In the first wave, the motivation was to turn materials and processes into profit through human appropriation. This relatively simple ‘profit-in-nature’ view became challenged due to the detrimental impact of economic activities on the environment and non-human world, a problem that was increasingly recognised during the late twentieth century. The critique of ‘profit-in-nature’ had both normative and ontological aspects: according to the ontological critique, natural resources do not act the way conventional economic units are supposed to do (Polanyi 2001). When something is appropriated from nature, it is not a single, independent good whose utilisation would have no effect on other goods; rather, the use of ecological materials and processes has far-reaching impacts external to this utilisation. These remarks gave rise to the second wave of the commodification of nature, a concern with how the negative externalities and harmful impacts of economic activities on the environment and ecological world can be restricted. The second wave created a broad acceptance that environmental markets, including the monetisation (economic inclusion) of negative externalities and for-profit conservation strategies are an appropriate way to protect nature (Dempsey and Suarez 2016; Liverman 2004; McAfee 1999). The non-human world can be priced in different ways to regulate how extensively and in which ways it can be utilised for human purposes.¹⁸

The commodification of nature, as described above, represents a form of the instrumental rationalisation of non-human nature. Does it count as reification too? To evaluate this, I will draw on different accounts of reification, as any single framework that

concerns reification of persons or social institutions is not directly applicable here because the entities in question are so different. I begin by considering the features that form the core of reification in Lukács's works since they constitute the foundation for other approaches to this phenomenon.

Two integral features of reification are consistently present in Lukács's writings: illusion and 'thing-likeness' (Hull 2013: 52–54). Illusion means that the 'fundamental nature' of the perceived entity becomes obscured or distorted in reification, and thing-likeness denotes the character of this distortion, namely that the entity is deprived of essential (qualitative) characteristics and reduced to a simple thing (for Lukács, a commodified object). The commodification of nature tends to involve these misapprehensions. Commodification obscures the fundamental characteristics of non-human nature that exist beyond, and regardless of, commodification and human acknowledgement (Hailwood 2015: 135). Fully commodified non-human entities are viewed as contingent objects of exchange rather than living, self-regulating, self-reproducing and interconnected entities: for unaware consumers and companies, they are mere 'things-for-use' rather than entities with a variety of meanings beyond use value.¹⁹ In addition to these features, there is a third essential element of reification in Lukács's writings: reification conceals the social constructedness of reified entities. This point, notably, is inapplicable in the case of the non-human characteristics of non-human nature. I will return to this remark later.

Structurally, the commodification of nature clearly resembles the process (described by Lukács and Honneth) where people begin to perceive human-made objects and exchange partners merely as objects of profitable transactions. Reification constitutes a 'second nature' for humans, which makes it a structurally false praxis (Honneth 2008: 25–26): an assemblage of habits and attitudes that diverges from 'truer' forms of praxis (those that are not based on the illusory objectivity of social phenomena).²⁰ Whether the commodification of nature really

has become a habitual praxis requires further examination, but there is some support for this claim regarding the industrialised world's activities (e.g. Light and Higgs 1996). In a common Western setting, economic parlance steers governance and nature is present as a background whose value is mainly economic and comparable with other monetised entities through cost-benefit analyses, even if the existence of boundary conditions is acknowledged. This commodifying view has become normal even in environmental politics, which is evident in popular procedures like the economic valuation of 'ecosystem services'. Alternative approaches tend to be contested as unrealistic, irrational or ideological, and the equally ideological origin of commodification remains unnoticed because it is masked as 'morally neutral' instrumental rationalisation.

The differences between the first and the second wave of the commodification of nature become interesting in this light. In the second wave, the extension of commodification (environmental markets and for-profit protection) is offered as a remedy to the problems caused by commodification in the first place. This, in my view, signifies the normalisation of the commodification of nature. Herbert Marcuse (1964: 123-143) argued that capitalism succeeded in absorbing its contradictions by using reforms that integrated the proletariat or its concerns into the capitalist system itself, removing the opposition between the two. The integration of the issues of environmental protection into the economic framework causes the critique of commodifying nature to lose much of its power. Commodification becomes the solution to the problems of commodification and so habitualised. For-profit protection also disempowers people, which is typical of reifying processes: the corporate restoration of nature in the United States has suppressed the democratic potential of restoration (Light and Higgs 1996: 240).

In contrast to the initial idea of reification, however, the commodification of nature appears 'inverted'. It is not about forgetting the human-madness of social constructions, but

about forgetting that there is ‘more to nature’ than its socially constructed aspects. The fully commodified entities appear as ‘numb and lifeless things’ malleable by the principles of economics. Putting a price tag on an endangered species makes its status open to market negotiations. The existence of a species is brought into the realm of ‘human-built laws’, mutable by human decisions. Due to this ‘invertedness’, Hailwood (2015: 98) maintains, the notion of reification cannot apply to non-human nature, though it might be objectified in problematic ways. Since Hailwood draws on Honnethian terminology, albeit with some modification, his view on this matter involves a conceptual tension. For Honneth, entities that can be recognised can also be reified (reification is forgetfulness of recognition). For Hailwood, non-human nature can be recognised but not reified. It remains somewhat unclear what term Hailwood would use for the habitualised forgetting of the recognition of nature.

One reason for the need of a new concept here is that the phenomenon I have discussed is not identical with inappropriate objectification. It does not fit Hailwood’s (admirably thorough) categorisation concerning the different forms of alienation from the environment and non-human nature either. Hailwood distinguishes three types of alienation: reification (which he finds inapplicable to non-human nature), property alienation and estrangement. Property alienation concerns the justifications and limits of the property system (ibid.: 156). In my discussion, there are broader ensembles of structures and practices at stake, and the property system is not the only factor that may result in the reification of nature. Nor can my concerns be viewed as a negation of ‘estrangement from nature’. Estrangement marks a separation from non-human nature that allows respect for, and living with, its otherness; this kind of estrangement is positive and its rejection negative, since overcoming it would entail transforming nature into humanised landscape (ibid.: 125–133). Estrangement from nature is a way to resist the domination of nature. The processes I have discussed are not merely the negation of such estrangement. Reification essentially involves undesirable forms of

estrangement (blindness to the fundamental characteristics of the reified entity), and dereification requires achieving a certain positive re-engagement with the entities in question.²¹ Moreover, the feature of habituality that is essential for the notion of reification is not captured in the notion of estrangement (and even less with its negation, the intentional transformation of nature).

DISCUSSION

Three forms of reification are relevant to environmental and ecological concerns. Reification of the environment means neglecting the way in which human activities influence the environment or forgetting the human-madeness (and mutability) of our surroundings or the humanised landscape. Secondly, reification of non-human animals significantly resembles the reification of persons; intensive industrial meat production is an instance of this process that de-animalises animals in food production and reduces them to mere production units. The third potential realm of reification, non-human nature, is more controversial. I propose that the reification of non-human nature is an appropriate and useful notion, with some reservations. First, it differs from the reification of the environment: the latter resembles the reification of social institutions, since both deny or forget the human-builtness of the reified entities. Non-human nature, however, is not built by humans. Hence, it is more apt to think about the reification of nature as a further, modified development of the concept. I assert that reification can concern both socially constructed realms and non-human nature: these ideas are not mutually exclusive.²² Admittedly, the notion of the reification of nature modifies one core feature of the term: it does not concern the 'naturalisation' of socially constructed entities. Rather, it concerns the misapprehension of non-human entities by either mistaking them for humanly made objects or by lumping them all, living and lifeless, into the same

group called ‘natural objects’ and that have a meaning only in relation to human appropriation.

Reification processes cannot be fully captured with the established terminology in environmental philosophy. Terms denoting instrumentalisation are too vague and neglect the aspects of habitualisation and involuntariness that are essential for reification. Nor are the different realms of environmentally relevant reification adequately captured by the existing terminology of alienation or estrangement, as the previous section illustrates. Granted, it is still possible to maintain that reification should be delimited to denote only the humanised realm, in which case it also concerns the reification of the environment and human–animal relations. In that case, the phenomenon I have discussed as the third form of reification could alternatively be called something like ‘the habitualised instrumentalisation of non-human nature’. I view this as a clumsy expression for describing such a relevant phenomenon, but let the future discussions show the viability of alternative notions.

Reification holds promise as a concept for studying the socially induced practices of the misapprehension of the environment, animals and non-human nature, practices that have become so normalised in society that some of them are accepted as basic social facts (Thompson 2017). Identifying various instances of reification and studying their origins reveals deep-rooted patterns and practices that lie beyond the ecologically detrimental courses of human action. The notion is also useful in allowing the examination of certain structurally rooted and habitualised patterns of the domination of nature without a need to adopt the language of justice or to defend the intrinsic moral value of non-human entities. The point is, rather, that by distorting the comprehension of the world, reification forecloses the possibilities of addressing the moral (and political) questions that relate to reified entities because those questions become merely technical. One purpose of environmental philosophy is to point out questions in places where they are not noticed: studies of reification

significantly contribute to this end.

Hailwood (2015: 252) suggests that the idea of ‘alienation from nature’, with its different meanings, provides useful tools for structuring deliberation about environmental problems. Reification is an essential term for this discourse and helps clarify particular forms of detachment and their entrenchment in (post)modern societies. The epistemic and social-structural orientation of the concept is particularly interesting and directs attention towards questions of how patterns of reification emerge and how they can be overcome. A major concern in critical theory is that freedom and autonomy are compromised in our society in different ways that need to be identified and resolved. The reification of non-human animals and nature is at the heart of that concern.

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Queries to notes – Note that queried passages are highlighted yellow; note numbers may change due to the acceptance of Track Changes.

n.1 - Lukács 1971: xx – Page number needed.

n.2 - Lukács 1967: xx–xx – Page run needed for 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness*

n.18 – see also note 15 – Please check that this is still correct.

¹ ‘Merely a thing’ denotes that an entity is reduced to a much simpler object than it really is.

What this means varies depending on different accounts of reification. For Lukács, reification deprives social entities of their social and qualitative characters, and ‘thing-likeness’ denotes essentially the commodity form that ‘stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man’ (Lukács 1971: 100). Other interpretations are discussed later in this article.

² Lukács was criticised for equating reification and objectification at certain points, and he later revised his views (with some self-criticism) on the difference between the two (see Lukács 1971: ix–xxxix).

³ Hull names one more difference, namely that Nussbaum’s objectification is of persons whereas reification in the Lukácsian sense is of actions or human relations. This point is contested: Honneth, for example, talks about the reification of persons.

⁴ ‘Second nature’ is not identical with socially constructed reality. Social constructions become second nature only when they are viewed as necessary, immediate, ‘acting like nature’: this makes them appear natural and necessary, which makes changing them difficult (Hegel 1991).

⁵ See e.g. Butler (2008), Honneth (2008), Ikäheimo (2016) and Jütten (2010).

⁶ To be precise, the commodification of other human beings cannot be literal. Economic exchange partners are viewed as humans (a precondition for partnership in exchange). Jütten (2010) argues that reification must be understood metaphorically, as a stance where one approaches a fellow human *as if* she were a thing (not *as* a thing). Honneth (2008) proposes restricting the notion of reification only to the literal ‘thingification’ that neglects all human

features of reified persons. Such reification hardly exists in reality: even in human trafficking, victims are assumed to understand human speech, for example.

⁷ It is worth noting that Vogel does not take an explicit stance here, and that he speaks of a symptom rather than an instance of reification. This leaves it somewhat unclear whether Vogel thinks that environmentalists reify nature.

⁸ There is one crucial difference, though. Social institutions like money are often ontologically contingent (Testa 2015) in their full sense: money comes into existence only through the acceptance of its status as an institution. However, in the case of climate change, the relevant physiochemical processes exist regardless of the acceptance of their existence or anthropogenic origin.

⁹ The animal ethics discourse and animal rights movements do acknowledge these issues in their discourse. Yet, this discourse is not recognised by society in general. This is evident in the extensive scale and increase in industrialised meat production, the normality of a diet that includes mass-produced meat on a daily basis, and in the public discourse where concerns for animal welfare do not usually call for transformative changes in production.

¹⁰ This might also explain why many people intuitively consider ‘production animals’ and pets so differently: pets have the opportunity to express complex behaviour and interact with humans.

¹¹ Some theorists would perhaps characterise the situation as one where the ‘commodity form’ has actually become the true character of those animals (rather than just concealed it). Lukács and Honneth, however, view reification as a process that conceals rather than erodes the fundamental character of reified entities. I follow their thinking here: I believe that the fundamental character of those animals ‘is still there’ in the background, and is actually visible for people who (for some reason) have acquired a different perception of those animals.

¹² Humans can ‘make up’ a forest but forests may also emerge on their own; in contrast, human-made artefacts or cultural systems could not emerge without human makers.

Resolving the status of borderline cases is not decisive for the purposes of this article.

¹³ The literature on reification is vague about the meaning of ‘thing’ in the process of ‘thingification’. I view it as essentially depending on the kinds of entities that may be subject to reification: even humans and social institutions are thingified differently. The conceptual question is then not about a unified meaning of a ‘thing’ in thingification but whether reification should denote only the (habitualised) thingification of socially constructed entities and intersubjective relations or also processes that deprive non-human entities of their meanings beyond their use value for humans.

¹⁴ Critical theory has been accused of adopting ‘the universalising absolute’ and totalising explanations where ‘we all’ equally contribute to a problematic and ‘all-encompassing’ phenomenon. I do not commit to such views but I believe that even I may, albeit unconsciously, instrumentalise non-human entities sometimes (due to the habitual nature of such practices).

¹⁵ Commodification is not the only road to reification: a socialistic system, for example, is not a shield against instrumental rationalisation either.

¹⁶ The framing of justice separates this discourse from the one presented here, though there is a connection: acknowledging the autonomy and integrity of nature is both an epistemic and normative issue (Heyd 2005).

¹⁷ Contrary to Lukács, I do not suggest that the capitalist system will necessarily entail reification (let alone ‘all-embracing reification’) or that reification will always originate from capitalism (see also note 14).

¹⁸ Recently, non-monetary mechanisms such as ecological compensation (or biodiversity offsetting) have been brought into the discussion (e.g. Coralie et al. 2015; McKenney and

Kiesecker 2010). The implications of this new discourse to the ‘mainstream of commodification’ are still unclear, and call for further investigation.

¹⁹ For both Lukács and Honneth, reification also involves the loss of empathic engagement. It is possible that perceiving nature merely as a commodity results in the loss of empathic engagement with it, though I leave this open since it is unclear what empathic engagement means in other than interpersonal relations.

²⁰ The critique of reification focuses on the ontological and/or epistemic aspects of how humans comprehend reified entities. However, there is no one-to-one relation between a particular ontological stance and a set of normative commitments. The case of ecological holism exemplifies this (Hayward 1997; James 2007). This point also relates to the legitimacy of an objectifying stance in particular contexts like doing science.

²¹ This does not mean the appropriation of the non-human realm for human use. Analogously, recognising different cultures requires overcoming some estrangement from them and empathetic engagement towards their members, which does not involve the transformation of those cultures into something else.

²² Vogel likely finds them incompatible though, because he maintains that there is no ‘non-human nature’.