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The Loss of Nature in Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy. Rereading Mead with Merleau-Ponty

Jean-Philippe Deranty

[g.h. Mead 1863 -1931](#)

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Jean-Philippe Deranty

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the model of interaction at the heart of Axel Honneth's social philosophy. It argues that interaction in his mature ethics of recognition has been reduced to intercourse between human persons and that the role of nature is now missing from it. The ethics of recognition takes into account neither the material dimensions of individual and social action, nor the normative meaning of non-human persons and natural environments. The loss of nature in the mature ethics of recognition is made visible through a comparison with Honneth's initial formulation of his project. As an anthropology of intersubjectivity combining the teaching of the German philosophical anthropologists and G.H. Mead, his first model sought to ground social theory in the natural preconditions of human action. The last part of the article argues that a return to Mead's theory of practical intersubjectivity informed by Merleau-Ponty's germane theory of intercorporeity provides essential conceptual tools to enable the integration of the natural and the material within the theory of recognition.

KEYWORDS: Honneth, Habermas, Mead, Merleau-Ponty, Praxis, Philosophical Anthropology, Intersubjectivity

This paper aims to contribute to the question of 'critique today' by conducting a critical

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DCR

structure ~ inter-corporeity
agency
culture
generative = negentropy
mechanism

discussion of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, one of the most sophisticated models of critical social theory available today. The paper's basic question for the ethics of recognition is whether the embrace of Habermas' radical intersubjectivistic turn has led to the loss of nature in his accounts of socialisation, social integration, and social reproduction, a loss with seriously detrimental political implications.

Honneth's theory of recognition arose from the attempt to overcome immanently some of the perceived conceptual and political abstractions in Habermas' theory of communicative action. As this paper will argue, prominent in this immanent critique was the diagnosis of the absence of the dimension of nature, indeed a naturalistic account of intersubjectivity, in Habermas' theory. Honneth's diagnosis pointed firstly to the specific problem of the disembodied aspect of a communicative action, and was further developed into the major attempt at a comprehensive shift in the grounding of critical theory, from the theory of language to a philosophical anthropology along the lines of a modernised philosophy of nature with natural-scientific credentials. The political, ecological, aspect of Honneth's shift was presented in these early studies as not just an implication, but also a central inspiration for his regrouping of critical theory. Paradoxically, however, the autonomous model that arose from Honneth's early critical studies appears to have reproduced the loss of nature it was supposed to correct.

The paper starts by following the path that led to Honneth's theory of recognition from its beginnings as an immanent critique of Habermas' social theory (section I). The paradoxical omissions in Honneth's own model are then highlighted (section II). Section III suggests that a return to Merleau-Ponty would allow for a more substantive model in which these omissions could be corrected, whilst maintaining Honneth's initial programme. This recourse to the French phenomenologist can be justified, I argue, from within Honneth's own theoretical impetus, by a comparison between Merleau-Ponty's late work and the social psychology of Mead, the crucial reference in the early development of the ethics of recognition.

I. Anthropology of Social Action

An interesting way to reconstruct the stages that led Honneth to his theory of recognition is by reading retrospectively his first two books, namely *Social Action and Human Nature*, written with Hans Joas, and *The Critique of Power*, published in 1985. An impressive aspect of Axel Honneth's thinking is the consistency with which he has been able to maintain the fundamental intuitions inspiring his thought. Despite important corrections and shifts over the twenty-five years since his first publications, these fundamental inspirations behind his work are still operative today. This reconstruction of Honneth's journey towards the ethics of recognition aims to demonstrate how prominent the place of nature was in his initial project.

Social Action and Human Nature offers a historical-conceptual reconstruction of the tradition of philosophical anthropology, from Feuerbach to Habermas. **Anthropology** is here understood in the sense of the twentieth-century German tradition, with the works of Arnold Gehlen, Helmut Plessner and Agnes Heller being the most famous references in the English-speaking world. It designates the study of **anthropos** in comparison with other forms of life, especially animals, as opposed to the **diachronic-synchronic** comparative study of the different ways of being human. The interest behind the reconstruction of this tradition of thought was anything but mere historical scholarship. Rather, applying the programme critical theory, the two young authors justified their undertaking through the intertwinement of theory and practice, with the practical exigencies of the time providing the driving impetus for the theoretical work, the latter in turn having the task of guiding the practical: "Today, it is hardly necessary to give lengthy justifications for concerning oneself with anthropology in the German sense within the framework of the **social and cultural sciences**. The themes of various social movements lead all too clearly in this direction."¹

The theoretical contribution that is expected to arise from the reconstruction of German philosophical anthropology is the re-elaboration of a substantive notion of **praxis**, signifying both **individual and social action**. The key parameters guiding the reading of the 'philosophical anthropologists' are more or less entailed in the notion of *praxis* that was bequeathed by the tradition of 'Western Marxism', the approach to reading Marx that made *praxis* its central concept.

The latter entails the ideas that individuals and groups are actively engaged in the reproduction and transformation of society, that **society is reproduced by agents and groups struggling over the meaning of social norms**, and that history is therefore an **open context of action**. Praxis Marxism places the accent on the agency of social groups and individuals, on the normativity inherent in processes of social integration, on the openness of the historical field, and, as a consequence, the **constitutive** role played by **social struggles**. A reader familiar with Honneth's later work, notably *Struggle for Recognition*, can easily see how much the first work published by the young scholar had already identified with amazing perspicacity and maturity the guiding threads of his later thought.

The attempt at rethinking *praxis* implies a revision of historical materialism to identify the mistakes and illusions that hampered both previous interpretations of Marx and indeed Marx's own thinking. The very last section of the book follows the early attempts by Habermas at a reconstruction of historical materialism. It is from Habermas' social theory that the authors expect this successful revision of historical materialism and the redemption of praxis. In Habermas, they find the most developed current model of social theory defending a substantial notion of *praxis*, a defence both of the validity of the concept as such as well as of a practically oriented social theory. Habermas' theory is premised upon the critique of the reductionism to be found in Marx's mature writings, with his reduction of social action to the forces of production at the cost of a separate analysis of the social and cultural spheres, the sphere of the relations of production. Beyond Habermas' critical readings of Marx, the young scholars also adopt Habermas' conceptual framework. The call for an **intersubjectivistic turn** in philosophy, the concept of **communicative action**, and the adjunct notion of social evolution as gradual emancipation from domination, are interpreted as indispensable conceptual advances in social theory.

Honneth and Joas also borrow from Habermas the thought that the correction of historical materialism, the unlocking of the transformative potential of social and historical praxis, requires recourse to anthropological arguments, a type of argument that was rejected by orthodox Marxism. In the *Critique of Power*, **Honneth** retraces in great detail the continuous line of anthropological arguments used by Habermas, from his very early attempts at a 'reconstruction of historical materialism' influenced by his reading of Arnold Gehlen and an

anthropologically-minded interpretation of Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*, to the famous 1965 inaugural address in Frankfurt, where,² following the ground-breaking advances made in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, the 'transcendental-anthropological' starting point of the first writings is transformed into the study of 'knowledge-constitutive interests'.³

protection

In *Social Action and Human Nature*, the authors focus critically on a different continuity in Habermas' thought, one, however, that is linked directly with his use of anthropological arguments: his dualistic vision of society, split between the spheres of labour and interaction. Famously, in the limited context of the positivism debate, Habermas attempted to root the different types of scientific inquiry in fundamental human interests. On the one hand, "the natural sciences follow the cognition-directing interest in instrumental disposition over nature," while on the other hand, "the social sciences allow themselves to be guided by interests in the preservation and expansion of intersubjective communication and agreement, an interest which became a matter of necessity for the survival of the species with its dependence on language."⁴ Habermas generalised these epistemological considerations to make them the guiding thread of his theory of rationality and society. The "cognition-directed interest in instrumental disposition over nature" gives rise to the techniques and the natural sciences, but it also designates a dimension of rationality, the *instrumental*, or *purposive* one, and is linked to the material side of social reproduction. The other fundamental interest, the "interest in the preservation and expansion of intersubjective communication and agreement," explains not just the emergence of social and cultural sciences, but, more profoundly, is the root of *communicative* reason; it is linked with the aspect of society that is best viewed in terms of *interaction*, or *communicative* understanding.

Later on, the founding of social theory in an anthropology of knowledge is replaced by a grounding in universal pragmatics. But the quotation above already indicates that universal pragmatics is to some extent another form of anthropological foundation. If the interest in a communication free from domination 'became a matter of necessity for the survival of the species with its dependence on language', it is clear that the development of a theory of communicative action through the pragmatics of speech acts was already prepared by the first anthropological speculations. In his later philosophy,

Habermas thinks of his theory of speech acts as delivering the structural invariants of all forms of human interaction. The theory of communicative reason is thus a kind of philosophical anthropology after the linguistic turn; it performs a linguistification of philosophical anthropology.⁵ This linguistic turn to philosophical anthropology, however, continues to underpin a dualistic vision of society since the **linguistic operations** of communicative action are said to take place in lifeworlds that are **opposed to the functional systems attending to the material side of social reproduction**.⁶ The theory of the **linguistic constitution of lifeworlds** leads directly to the dualism of system and lifeworld, a dualism that reproduces the old dualism of labour and interaction.

The second feature of **Habermas' theory** of society critically highlighted by the authors is the fact that it is embedded in a conceptual reconstruction of the **logic of social evolution**. The interest in the developmental potentials inscribed in the structure of instrumental and communicative rationality, potentials that are, once again, conceived on the basis of "anthropologically **deep-seated systems of rules**,"⁷ led Habermas to his distinction between an evolution of society understood, on the one hand, as the norm-free and **supra-subjective process of systemic complexification**, and on the other, the evolution of society as **'rationalisation of the lifeworld'**. What the authors bemoan is the *reconstructive method*, which identifies formal levels of cognitive (instrumental-cognitive and moral-cognitive) learning, completely detached from historical events and social movements.

The fundamental critical insight explaining the course of Honneth's own model, is that both the dualism of system and lifeworld and the logic of social evolution, and worse still their combination, rob Habermas' reconstructions of historical materialism of the very gift that was supposed to be delivered by them: namely, a rejuvenated, substantive, practically oriented theory of **praxis**, a **theory of social action cured of historical and conceptual reductionisms** and made practically relevant through its focus on communication. In the *Critique of Power*, one of the main critical threads followed by Honneth throughout the last two chapters is the dualism of system and lifeworld. Theoretically, it leads to the untenable fictions of conceiving of the economy and the political institutions as norm-free, and of the lifeworld as power-free domains of social reproduction. This reduces the critique of political economy and institutions

to the diagnosis of encroachments of systemic logic upon the lifeworld, and subsequently to a skewed interpretation of contemporary political movements aiming at social transformation. With this, the practical relevance of social theory becomes **problematic**. *Social Action and Human Nature* emphasised more the 'social evolution' aspect of the critique, but the same negative outcomes were identified:

If it were conceived as an evolutionary theory in this fashion, historical materialism would have relinquished every possibility of providing explanatory interpretations of history that intervene instructively in a present-day situation of social confrontations.⁸

Honneth's project arises from the attempt to develop a social theory centred around the notions of normative interaction and social and historical agency, a reinvigorated historical materialism centred on praxis, which avoids the theoretical abstraction and practical shortcomings identified in Habermas' social theory. With Joas, he hoped to fulfil that programme by the development of an alternative philosophical anthropology drawing on the German tradition. This tradition recommended itself because it provides a substantial fleshing out of the intersubjectivistic premise, and a full characterisation of praxis.

The work of Arnold Gehlen is the first fundamental reference point. His thesis about the evolutionary underspecialisation and lack of determination of the human organism compared to its animal counterpart accounts in powerful naturalistic terms for the specificity of human action and the biological root of culture. **Human beings' organic deficiency is compensated for by the capacity/necessity to act**. With the rise of the capacity for autonomous action detached from instinctual predetermination, the **triangle of inner impulse-perception-motility** which characterises the instinctual response of animal organisms to external stimuli is broken. This means that through action, human beings *shape* their own structures of instincts, perception and motility. Ontogenetically and phylogenetically, human beings always need to *cultivate* their *natural* endowments in order to survive, or to say it differently, their relatively **underdetermined first nature forces them to survive through the development of a second nature**.

But Gehlen, despite his emphasis on the symbolic dimension of even the most basic human capacities, continues to use a solipsistic paradigm. The second

crucial reference point is therefore the work of George Herbert Mead whose central contention is that all processes of 'self-shaping' that compensate for organic deficiency are structured *socially*. Like Gehlen, Mead defends a pragmatic premise, the idea that human capacities, from perception to conceptual thinking and life in institutions, arise from the exigencies of action. But his pragmatism is combined with a most thorough defence of the intersubjectivistic premise: that the human capacity for action, down to the simple perception of the external world, depends structurally upon a capacity to take different perspectives upon the world, a capacity which is developed only during the **constitution of the self in socialisation**.

Role
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Whilst the gesture of grounding social theory in anthropological arguments follows Habermas' example, the tradition that Honneth and Joas reconstruct helps to overcome the abstractions found in his social theory. It can do this because it undercuts all structural dualisms by pointing to a *unique*, biological precondition for all types of social action, namely the specific constitution of the **human organism and the specific types of action that it enables and requires**. An essential aspect of the rejection of Habermas' social theory will therefore target the **linguistification of anthropology**. A significant passage of *Critique of Power*, summarises this quite well:

Habermas' theory leaves behind the framework in which it had originally been grounded as anthropology of knowledge. The investigation of the basic structures of intersubjectivity is directed exclusively to an analysis of the rules of speech so that the bodily and physical dimension of social action no longer comes into view.⁹

Feuerbach's sensualism already gives an indication of a more fully *embodied* and *unified* account of social interaction. Before Mead, it is in **Feuerbach's 'anthropological materialism'**, viewed now as the initiator of philosophical anthropology, that one finds a powerful, alternative way of writing an anthropology of intersubjectivity that finds its roots in the **'sensuous' aspect of anthropogenesis**, and not in language: "Feuerbach, they write, rehabilitates sensuous pre-philosophical experience of the world not only as the foundation, but also as the medium and end of thought," but he also "complements the idea of a sensuousness rooted in the **human organism** with the notion of an **a priori intersubjectivity of the human being**." He was the first to take into con-

sideration both epistemologically and substantially the significance of the specifically human structure of intersubjectivity.”¹⁰ Feuerbach is viewed as the initiator of a line of inquiry that leads to **Mead and Winnicott**, a tradition that is seen by Honneth and Joas as the best way to defend the communicative turn in social theory without reproducing the abstractions of Habermas’ models.

In later texts, Honneth draws out other deleterious consequences of Habermas’ exclusive focus on language, notably the deficit in critical-theoretical potential that flows on from this: subjects do not engage primarily to defend their participation in communication, but react to **experiences of injustice** that are often caused by **non-linguistic social phenomena**, and are often experienced **extra-linguistically**. The turn towards the paradigm of recognition arises from the necessity to retain the full hermeneutic depth of experiences of injustice. This is, however, only the critical side to a positive, alternative account of ontogenesis. The recognition model arises from the necessity to be true to the *pre- or extra-linguistic* dimensions of social experience. The fundamental idea is that intersubjectivity has pre-linguistic and extra-linguistic origins and is sustained not just through linguistic means but all kinds of *material* phenomena, notably in and through the **flesh of bodies**.¹¹ For example, in primary socialisation, the recognition model points to constitutive and normative moments that occur before language. In social life, the focus on recognition takes into account all those egregious social ‘gestures’ and institutional effects that harm subjects before or beyond language.

Another passage in *Social Action and Human Nature* which gives a good characterisation, within a specific context, of the shift from a linguistic anthropology to an anthropology grounded in the biology of the human organism is a passage in which Honneth and Joas review Helmut Plessner’s anthropological account of the human capacity to express needs and emotions. The crux of **Plessner’s model** is the distinction between **‘being a body’**, the idea that the human being *is* its own flesh, as opposed to **‘having a body’**, the idea that the human being is able to relate to her own body instrumentally, for instance in language and in expressive gestures. This is the distinction that **Husserl** drew between the body as **Leib, flesh**, and the body as **Körper, the objectual-instrumental body**. Honneth and Joas quote Habermas’ critique of Plessner and his own version of the twofold nature of the human body:

“would it be more plausible to derive the structure of the mirror-I directly from the structure of linguistic communication—and the formation of the self from the acquisition of linguistic competence, in particular from the practical acquisition of an understanding of the system of personal pronouns?”¹² The rejection of this linguistic approach to the human body provides one of the defining negative arguments in Honneth’s later project:

Habermas is mistaken when he too hastily identifies the fundamental structure of intersubjectivity with speech. It is, ontogenetically speaking, beyond all doubt that the acquisition of the ability to identify one’s objectual-instrumental body [*Körper*] as properly one’s own clearly precedes the ‘practical acquisition of an understanding of the system of personal pronouns’. Similarly, it cannot be maintained that the demarcation from each other of communicative and propositional content of utterances is prerequisite for the human being’s consciousness of his bodiliness under the twofold aspect of his organismal bodiliness [*Leib*] and his objectual-instrumental bodiliness [*Körper*]. A critique of Plessner’s anthropology from the standpoint of the theory of intersubjectivity must avoid narrowing a theory directed at the basic structures of intersubjectivity down to a theory of language and must develop its critique ontogenetically . . .¹³

Finally, this turn towards the biological preconditions of human interaction is not solely necessitated by the immanent progress of social theory, but more generally by the political situation. In the introduction to *Social Action and Human Nature*, as we saw, the two young scholars noted that the new political movements that had emerged and transformed the political situation, the “ecological, counter-cultural and feminist struggles,” are all linked to the fundamental question of nature and humans’ relationship to it, nature and human nature: “The legitimacy of the question of the relationship of the human being to nature and of nature in the human being is today beyond all doubt.”¹⁴ The political imperative commands the theoretical programme: to think afresh the relationship between human and nature. The return to the bodily roots of interaction is therefore framed by the more general question of the place of the human being in Nature:

Our approach to anthropology regards itself as self-reflection of the social and cultural sciences on their biological foundations and on the normative content of their bodies of knowledge, considered in relation to determinate

historical and political problems, and its viewpoints is that of a humanisation of nature. This is to be understood in three ways. First, the **human being humanises nature**; that is, he transforms it into what is life-serving for himself and thereby creates (. . .) the cultural shapings of his nature. Second, the human being **humanises nature within himself** in the course of the long civilisation process that has been engaged in by the human species. Lastly, the **human being himself is a humanisation of nature**, being an upstart out of the animal kingdom; in the human being, nature becomes humane.¹⁵

The anthropological basis of social philosophy has been implicitly maintained in later developments. The ethics of recognition has been attacked for its reliance on strong anthropological arguments,¹⁶ and Honneth has accepted some of this criticism by distinguishing more sharply between the properly anthropological “grounding of recognition” and the historical variability of the forms of recognition.¹⁷ But if Mead is now no longer the central reference, Honneth continues to view German philosophical anthropology as an important contribution and regularly makes passing reference to it. The later developments, however, have lost the broad character of that tradition. Honneth today uses arguments drawn from genetic psychology, not just in the specific area of the theory of the subject, but as a genetic ground for the theory of normativity, and hence for the account of social integration in general. The anthropological programme has not been abandoned, but it is reduced to a social psychology that takes into consideration only human society and human communication.

II. The Loss of Nature

Despite the continuing reliance upon arguments that are anthropological in nature, the shift from the programme of a strong anthropology of intersubjectivity to the ethics of recognition is thus characterised by the abandonment of most of the ‘natural’ dimensions that gave the impetus to the programme developed in the first critical study. The ethics of recognition, whether in the shape that it took in *Struggle for Recognition*, or in its current version, draws its normative conclusions from a theory of **ontogenesis** restricted to human society (the family and the community at large). The original anthropological theory of intersubjectivity was conducted within the general framework of a philosophy of nature made relevant by the recourse to current research in

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the natural sciences. This framework has now been totally abandoned: it has been replaced by the perspective of genetic psychology and social psychology, narrowly understood, for the *constitutive* aspects of the theory, and moral psychology and moral epistemology for the *normative* aspects. Animals, plants, Nature, and even to some extent the human body, have lost their place in the theory, both in genetic-constitutive and in normative terms. We need to study these two aspects separately. A third dimension of the 'loss of nature' linked to the first two will then emerge.

1. The shift from anthropology to social psychology narrowly conceived has been noted. In working towards the alternative solution that will be presented in the third section, it is worth our while seeing how the shift could in fact already be detected in the different readings of Mead. This will illuminate the fundamental claim made in this article: that the **model of interaction** that has gradually emerged as the fundamental structure upon which the **ethics** of recognition is built, is restricted to *intersubjectivity* narrowly interpreted as '**inter-human interpersonality**'. **limited**

In Mead, as we saw, Honneth found, much like Habermas, "the fundamental prerequisite for an anthropology of social action."¹⁸ This is because of Mead's insistence on the social dependency of ego in its constitution, not just in respect of moral and epistemic learning, but also including perceptual experience. Mead offered a sophisticated, naturalistic defence of the inter-subjectivistic turn. The key argument underpinning his **symbolic interactionism** is well known: it states that the decisive difference between animal and human behaviour lies in the fact that with human beings and their relative lack of instinctual determination, the capacity for individual and social actions emerges, actions that are not regulated through instinct. **Mead** explains both modes of behaviour through the capacity to '**take the role of the other**'. This is the capacity to evoke in oneself the reaction of the other to one's own behaviour. With this capacity, the human self is able to look at his own behaviour from the perspective of the other participant in action. It is easy to see how this argument accounts for the possibility of social action understood as communication. By being able to see within himself the reaction of the other to his own behaviour, the individual is able to understand the other's reaction and to **coordinate purposefully his action to the other's action**. One can also see the normative implication of the 'taking the role of the other'

since the self is able to judge his own actions from the perspective of the internalised Other.

Even more profoundly, Mead makes this *decentring* of the human agent the condition for the perception of objects in the world as permanent things. It is worth dwelling briefly on this aspect of Mead's interactionism as it provides important arguments for the direction suggested below. How did Mead propose to justify the apparently extreme thesis that, as Honneth and Joas summarised: "knowledge gained from social experience is the precondition for the synthesis of 'things' out of the chaos of sense perception"?¹⁹

organology

The first element of the answer is that "the contact experience that constitutes the reality of the thing comes from the inside of the thing, and it comes from an inside that can never be reached by subdividing the thing. This reveals simply new surfaces." Mead argues that the thing is constructed as permanent and self-identical, as having an inside, through the *resistance* that it opposes to handling. The resistance that the object presents to contact or action is construed as the object's own capacity to act, behind which a quasi-'subject', with its self-identity, must be assumed. Mead gives the following example: "We are seeking the sort of resistance that we ourselves offer in grasping and manipulating things. (. . .) It is the sort of resistance which one hand offers to the other."²⁰ These experiences are illuminating because in them we can directly feel, from the inside so to speak, the power to resist an external pressure. These examples, however, are also misleading because, in Mead's behaviouristic framework, there is no privilege accorded to inner experience, no pre-given self-acquaintance. In fact, the rule that objects are constituted as one and permanent only as a result of their power of resistance applies just as well to the organisms themselves: "The inside of the thing is the same stuff as the inside of the organism. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that the organism projects this content into the object (. . .), for, in the first place, the organism is but another perceptual object."²¹ Organisms become reflectively aware of their having an inside, a self-identical unity, from the resistance that objects present to their actions upon them, in exactly the same manner that objects do: "It is the attitude of pressure appearing as an inside of the object and as the reaction to this object that constitutes the possibility of there being objects and physical selves over against the objects, and which constitutes the necessity of their reciprocal character."²²

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The anticipation of a power to resist on the part of an external object cannot be explained in terms of the projection of an inner experience in the external world. Mead argues that it is explained by the **role-taking capacity**, the capacity to **'take the attitude of the other'** which is at the heart of the **social constitution of selves**; by evoking in me the potential resistance to my action of the external object, I constitute its identity, just as my ego gradually constituted itself by integrating the expected reactions of others to my actions.

Importantly, since the anticipation of resistance is an anticipation of contact (the counterpressure to my own pressure), the distance senses elicit in the organism the very flesh of the objects, their qualitative, material sensuousness. It is *as if* my eyes were touching the object. Honneth and Joas describe elegantly this mechanism and its implications: **"the distance senses can of themselves trigger in the human organism the reaction of the sensation of resistance corresponding to the manipulation of things (hellip;)** The object is then perceived as an anticipated datum of contact sensation: we 'see' the heaviness, the hardness, or the warmth of an object from its appearance."²³

Such a 'social' theory of perception is clearly a powerful vindication of the intersubjectivistic paradigm since even the experience that is most obviously structured as the encounter of subject and object is shown to be structurally conditioned by capacities acquired through social experience. However, this great progress made by his theory of perception also led, I now want to suggest, to **a partial, purely 'interactionist' reading of Mead** that left out of consideration the 'natural' sides of sociality. It is as though Mead's social theory of perception had been taken as definitive proof of the intersubjectivistic turn without its material dimensions being retained. **definitely !!!**

The restriction to Mead's naturalism occurs in the different readings of Mead offered after Honneth and Joas' 1980 book, notably in *The Struggle for Recognition*. Chapter Four of the latter aims to provide a 'naturalistic' reinterpretation of Hegel's Jena theory of intersubjectivity via recourse to Mead. However, the account now focuses solely on the question of human individuation and socialisation. **Interaction and the 'social'**, which in Mead designate firstly the **field of proto-symbolic interaction** amongst animals,²⁴ have been reduced to the different types of interactions amongst human subjects. Interactionism now designates purely social, human relations. Mead's constant comparison

of human and animal forms of action emphasises the fact that human capacities, and in particular human sociality, are *naturally conditioned*, that is, made possible by natural endowments and required by the exigencies of survival in nature. Despite the qualitative, evolutionary discontinuity that Mead indeed constantly highlights, such discontinuity is also predicated upon a more profound shared condition: the **naturalistic character of organisms**, which to a partial yet crucial extent, is shared by humans and other organisms. In many passages of his *Philosophy of the Act*, for example, Mead voluntarily uses non-specific language that can apply to both animals and humans. By contrast, the implications of the tendency to read Mead anthropocentrically become especially clear if one reflects upon **the place of the body** in *Struggle for Recognition*.

Contrary to Habermas, as we saw, Honneth wants to ground social action pre-linguistically. However, it can be argued that the body, in *Struggle for Recognition* and in the texts following, no longer occupies the same substantial place that it had in the earlier critical study. In this study, Honneth and Joas followed Mead whose ‘naturalism’ was crystal-clear: “while minds and selves are essentially social products, products or phenomena of the social side of human experience, the **physiological mechanism** underlying experience is far from irrelevant—indeed is indispensable—to their *genesis and existence*.”²⁵ In the mature model of recognition, by contrast, the body plays no *constitutive* role in the processes of social interaction. The body is integrated solely as a material dimension that can *be constituted* by recognition, in other words *express* social recognition or *suffer* from misrecognition. The organism is no longer the *root* of social action, but one of its *modes* of expression. The *constitutive* dimension of organicity seems to disappear in Honneth’s later work. With its organicity, however, the human being betrays its natural origin, the fact that, if indeed she lives mainly in second nature, this is on the basis of having a **first nature that is totally in and of nature in general, however underdetermined and plastic it might be**. The natural aspect of human nature makes it always closer to animal nature than anthropocentric humanisms are willing to admit.

primary retention

2. The normative implications of this exclusion of ‘nature’ from the theory of social action might be serious. If the ethical is defined as the series of conditions that are necessary for the self-realisation of socialised individuals, then

there seems to be little room for any ethical duties towards non-human beings, except only indirectly. The preservation of a natural environment, the protection of non-human persons from pain and death, can only feature indirectly in such a model of ethics, as duties that are called for only for the fulfilment of human beings. This is obviously important, but it seems difficult to use the ethics of recognition to account for the feelings of wrong and even injustice that human beings feel on the part of desecrated natural sites, tortured, massacred or industrially exploited animals.²⁶

Of course, these remarks would be made completely irrelevant by the simple rejoinder that the ethics of recognition, unlike the theory of communicative action, is self-consciously limited in scope. It does not try to offer a phylogenetic counterpart to the ontogenetic narrative; its normative parts are voluntarily limited to human interaction, without prejudging other aspects of normativity. It is clearly conceived as a localised study in social theory restricted to social action understood as human action, with no claim to generalisation about norms, and no attempt at a systematic treatment of the classical Spirit-Nature problem as found in Hegel.

Such a rejoinder, however, appears rather weak when compared with the arguments presented in the first part of this article. The revival of the tradition of German philosophical anthropology was deemed necessary for reasons immanent to the development of social theory, to overcome the inherent limitations of Habermas' communicative theory of society, and also, and more pressingly, because of the active questioning stemming from contemporary social movements. From both directions, the programme of a renewed study of the relationship of the human to nature, both inner and external nature, was presented as a theoretical-practical imperative. In particular, if the ethics of recognition sets for itself as a criterion the capacity to be practically relevant for contemporary political debates, then the failure of its theory of normativity to frame meaningfully a discussion about the challenges of large-scale, expanding, ecological destruction, or the industrial treatment of animals, presents a significant problem. The necessity to develop a political response to the ecological crisis has clearly not diminished since 1980, and therefore neither has the necessity for normative philosophy to reject anthropocentric forms of humanism and to include in its scope the question of the animal, the elements, and the environment.

Honneth's response to this criticism was formulated in advance at the very end of *Struggle for Recognition*, with the reference to "an ecologically based asceticism" as one of the possible political applications of the ethics of recognition.²⁷ The same phrase was already used in the introduction to *Social Action and Human Nature*.²⁸ In both texts, Honneth rejects the idea that normative theory can *directly* guide political struggles. Whilst theory, as we saw, has an irreducible practical dimension, its application can only be indirect. It is up to the social and political struggles of the day, in a particular situation, to take hold of the theory's concepts and give them their precise social and political content. The problem with this response is that, whilst the possible link between an 'ecological asceticism' and the theory of social action was straightforward in the 1980 book, the same cannot be said about *Struggle for Recognition*. The 1980 book developed the programme of a substantive anthropology of intersubjectivity understood as the study of the 'humanisation of nature', in which the human being was therefore understood to be immanent to nature. The ecological perspective derived directly from this viewpoint. With *Struggle for Recognition*, the link is severed. How the necessity to develop a 'post-traditional solidarity' leads to an ecological programme is far from clear. In any case, it seems to imply that nature, the animal, have ethical relevance only indirectly, for the sole purpose of human "self-realisation," and the upholding of "individual and collective difference."²⁹ The ability of the ethics of recognition to account for the intrinsic normativity of nature and natural entities remains questionable.

3. Regardless of whether this critique does injustice to the ethics of recognition by blaming it for not answering questions it does not intend to consider, the restriction of interaction to human inter-personality has other detrimental implications. Our focus shifts from the place of nature in social action to the *nature of interaction*. By following the thread of the place of nature, it has appeared that the model of interaction that is used in the ethics of recognition has been to a large extent reduced to a form of intersubjective interactionism. The type of communication between two agents that Habermas takes as the ideal case for his studies on speech acts, and which derives from Mead's definition of communication, provides the basic structure in which all modes of interaction are conceptualised in Honneth's ethics of recognition. In the words of the early Honneth, it is this "social action (. . .) conceived of as a

communicative process in which at least two subjects co-ordinate their purposive actions with each other through agreement upon a shared definition of their situation, effected by means of symbols."³⁰ As a result of this fundamental definition, recognition is conceived of purely as relation between one agent and other agents, or in fact paradigmatically as the relation between one agent and another agent. Interaction in the ethics of recognition is reduced not just to interaction amongst human subjects, but also to interaction between human person and human person. Even in the second and third spheres of recognition, the model of interaction linking the individual with society at large is interpersonal, the relation of one person to all other persons. Society is conceived of not as 'social fact', but as an aggregate of socialised individuals.³¹

Strikingly, the early anthropology of intersubjectivity had identified this reduction of Mead's interactionism. In recounting the reception of Mead in Germany, Honneth and Joas wrote that his association with symbolic interactionism "gave the impression that (he) shared symbolic interactionism's restriction of action to interaction, that he too considered the natural foundations of action to be only of trivial importance, whether these were the human being's bodily endowment with needs, or an environment necessary to life."³² In fact, it is precisely because Mead offers a substantial theory of human action, one where the 'natural foundations of action' are fully integrated, that he was used as a primary reference. As the authors remarked: "Mead does not at all accord central importance to the form of action termed interaction, but rather to human beings' manipulation of physical objects. (. . .) Mead's goal is, then, not a theory of interaction, or of instrumental action, but the linking together of both of these theories."³³ We can only agree with this. The intersubjectivistic turn should not lead to the loss of the *object*.³⁴ There might be social preconditions to the constitution of the subject, but these are combined with a direct confrontation of the subject with a world of objectivity, and with the subject herself taking the position of the object. To identify the dangers of the subject-object paradigm, of the reduction of rationality to instrumentality, should not lead to the other extreme of an abandonment of instrumentality. Indeed, another of the abstractions in Habermas that the recourse to Mead could have corrected is the dualism of the forms of rationality. In Honneth's mature ethics of recognition, however, instrumental reason, the interest in *objective, material mediations*, seems to have all but disappeared.

This is not the place to attempt an extensive study of all the implications of this tendency of intersubjectivism. We can restrict ourselves to indicating the type of considerations that arise from it, and thus the type of account that is currently missing in the restricted version of interactionism upon which the current ethics of recognition is based. 'Nature' here will no longer mean the common ground of all living beings, it is no longer considered as *natura naturans*, but more simply and more broadly, as *natura naturata*, dynamic reality as a whole when it confronts human subjectivity. This includes matter, but also formed matter, 'things', objects, natural and man-made, tools and machines for instance, and even organisms viewed from an external perspective.

We can use as a guide the earlier summary of Mead's theory of perception. According to Mead, as stated, the unity of the human organism arises as the unitary reaction opposed to the pressure coming from external objects. This focus on the role of objectivity in the constitution of the subject opens a wide field of investigation to complement the existing account of ontogenesis in the *first* sphere of recognition. Following this indication, the study of the constitution of personal identity would also study the interactions of the young child with the world of objects: objects to manipulate, objects that hurt, objects that provide pleasure, objects to climb, and so on. This immediately draws the attention to the fact that the world of objects, by contrast with the world of intersubjectivity ideally conceived as reassuring (for example, the 'being held' stage in Winnicott), is a world of pleasure and pain, but more fundamentally a world of challenges, where the infant gradually gains the consciousness of her self through the constant experience of her limits and vulnerability, her inability to control and overcome, or even simply to defend herself. This surely plays an important structural role in cognitive-moral learning, and not just cognitive-epistemic learning. Consequently, there might well be important 'objectual'³⁵ dimensions to the need of young infants, and later still of adults, to momentarily reproduce the fusion with the significant Other: the need to escape from a world that is a constant challenge and threat, a world of scarcity and oppositionality.³⁶ More profoundly, the role of the objective world in subject-constitution might not just be limited to being the negative origin of the need for fusion, since fusion itself is structured around 'objective' qualities. The reassurance an infant gains from suckling the mother's breast is made possible by sensuous qualities, a taste, a smell, a touch. This

might be an important insight given the importance in Honneth's thinking of the early experiences of symbiosis to explain the irreducible asociality of socialised individuals.³⁷ The periodical moments of fusion are not purely intersubjective, they are also moments of *sensuous* fusion. The crucial thought is that fusion can actually occur only via the mediation of objects. The object is the material condition of intersubjectivity. Without the materiality of an object, be it a body or body part, there can be no reality to the intersubjective unity. The aim of fusion, even of pure intersubjective fusion, therefore always implies the search for a paradoxical Object that no longer objects; an object that is no longer an affront and a threat to the self, but an object that can materially carry or perform fusion. This leads us to ask speculatively if there might be ontogenetic origins to the myth of the reconciliation with Nature: namely, the flight from an obtrusive world and the experiences of happy reconciliation with privileged objects?³⁸

If we turn towards the third sphere of recognition, it is striking how abstract the social conception of labour has become in the mature theory of recognition. The normative dimension of labour is interpreted by Honneth through the 'achievement principle': work matters to individuals because it is the way in which they can be recognised by the community, not for their general and abstract status as subjects of rights, but for their particular competence, as contributors to the social division of labour. Again, retaining the focus on the 'objectual', or material, side of work might be crucial to account for the full depth of its constitutive and normative importance to subjects. This would require for instance that attention be given to the object as a product of work, and to the interaction with tools, instruments and machines, and even with matter. Recognition in the third sphere is not just recognition of skills and abilities; it is effected to a large extent via the mediation of the recognition, or lack thereof, of the product of work. To point to an important sociological fact: even when workers' rights are formally secured, the compromising of quality and safety standards that workers are forced to accept under productivity constraints can have the same damaging psychological effects as the direct misrecognition of their skills and identity. Again, as in the first sphere, the material aspect of work, the interaction with matter, also has constitutive importance. Work as a privileged form of praxis involves a direct encounter with matter, objects, machines. These dimensions carry their own specific normative weight and create particular forms of recognition under-

neath the general framework of society as a whole.³⁹ Here, we can content ourselves with the mention of the rich tradition of properly *materialist* accounts of praxis in the early Marx, in the post-Marxist tradition, and also in Hegel. The **loss of nature is also the loss of materiality and instrumentality.** An immense field opens before the ethics of recognition if it decides to be faithful to the tradition from which it grew and to focus more strongly on the *expressive* and *instrumental* dimensions of labour.⁴⁰

III. Rereading Mead with Merleau-Ponty

In the current version of the ethics of recognition, Mead no longer figures as the central reference. However, he was not abandoned for his naturalistic or behaviouristic methodologies, but on the basis of Honneth's further elaboration of his moral epistemology, and because of some of the normative implications of his social psychology. In the mechanism of role-taking, Honneth now argues, recognition is not tied to the specific quality of the agent's behaviour, which makes it impossible to precisely identify the normativity that occurs in recognitive relations.⁴¹ The immanent critique that I have developed in this article suggests that a rekindling of Mead's inspiration would be beneficial, but as can be seen, this suggestion does not directly contradict Honneth's new concerns with the normative implications of Mead's social psychology. Rather, Mead's naturalistic approach to interaction is taken here as an exemplary attempt to retain the focus on organicity and on the role of the object within the intersubjectivistic turn. I argue that attention must also be given to the materiality of recognition, which entails a broadening of the focus, from recognition as purely intersubjective to other forms of interaction, including interaction of the subject with the object. This shift in focus, I now want to briefly argue in conclusion, would be most beneficially complemented if the ethics of recognition confronted itself once more with Maurice **Merleau-Ponty's** own philosophy of **praxis.**⁴²

A first justification for the return to Merleau-Ponty in the context of this discussion lies in the fact that his theory of social and historical praxis defends precisely the fundamental anthropological assumptions that were presented in the first section of this article. Moreover, these assumptions also shape the theoretical specificity of 'praxis post-Marxism', the tradition that Honneth believes is the most fruitful for a theoretically and practically relevant social

theory. Merleau-Ponty's writings on history and politics point to a conception of **history as an open field of potentialities** against the reductionism of the Marxist orthodoxy of the time, and to a conception of **social action guaranteeing the normative agency of social subjects**.⁴³ This concept of historical and social action relies on a theory of intersubjectivity that was already centred on the notion of *communication*, a communication that is pre-linguistically rooted but finds its full expression in language and **symbolic realms**.⁴⁴

The substantial overlaps in background theoretical premises, methodology and conclusions between Mead and Merleau-Ponty have now been well established.⁴⁵ Both engage in a philosophical critique of the reductionism of modern science from the premise of lived experience. This premise, however, is not developed through recourse to *Erlebnis* philosophy or hermeneutics, but through a pragmatic programme based on the idea of a structure of behaviour that is not reducible to material, causal processes, yet remains dependent on the constraints of action in a given environment. As a result, they both give **genetic accounts of the symbolic realms, language, culture and history**, through comparative studies of animal and human forms of action and interaction.⁴⁶ In line with their critique of radical empiricism, they reject strict mechanistic models of animal behaviour by emphasising the *feedback* aspect of instinctual reaction, which implies that, as Mead puts it, "organic processes or responses in a sense constitute the objects to which they are responses."⁴⁷ Moreover, both view animal interaction as displaying the first traits of symbolic interaction.⁴⁸

Most importantly, as a result of their grounding symbolic capacities in behaviour, they both make **the body 'symbolic of the world'**, as Merleau-Ponty says. Mead's naturalistic methodology foreshadowed the rise of cognitive science with the rooting of behaviour and psychological phenomena in their neurological basis.⁴⁹ The combination of naturalistic and pragmatist arguments directing the study of the emergence and construction of the moments of action in the nervous system eventually leads to the idea that all forms of human dealing with the world have a **bodily equivalent, that the 'corporal schema' replicates the world**. This was well illustrated in the theory of perception: seeing an object is 'seeing' its heaviness and roughness, and since contact perception is rooted in organic responses, the anticipated contact experiences triggered by vision also trigger specific postures in the organism. This

is true of course of animal perception, and more importantly, there is conversely a whole animal aspect to human perception. The specificity of the human organism that enables its superior mode of perception is that it is reflexive and open: it can see itself as an organism in the world,⁵⁰ and on the basis of the 'circuit' (Merleau-Ponty) that it thus opens up, it can 'pick out' elements in the environment.



The idea that the corporal scheme replicates the world, that the world is echoed in our body's attitudes, is obviously one of the most important results of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception.⁵¹ Much of Merleau-Ponty's late work is dedicated to working out all the implications of this central thought. The fundamental conclusion is captured in the notion of *intercorporeity*: on the basis of its reflexivity and openness, "the body as touching-touched, as seeing-seen,"⁵² is the "locus of a sort of reflection and is thus able to relate to something that is not its own mass, to close its circuit upon the visible."⁵³

This is the aspect of Merleau-Ponty's late work that yields its most fruitful contribution in the context of this discussion. The first advance that the notion of intercorporeity allows concerns the problem of the animal, as it helps overcome anthropocentric humanism: "We study the human being in his/her body in order to see it emerge as different from the animal, not by addition of reason, in brief in the *Ineinander* with the animal (strange anticipations or caricatures of the human being in the animal)."⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty makes explicit the idea that is the basis of Mead's naturalistic inquiries: the primordial commonality of human and animal forms of action and interaction on the basis of their shared organicity, the fact that "my body is made of their corporeity."⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty eloquently emphasises the capacity of *empathy*, or *Einfühlung*, that this common organicity gives rise to: the capacity for human beings to feel an equivalent in their flesh of what happens to the flesh of other living beings, notably of animals.⁵⁶ The normative implications of this are obvious. We return to the idea of an organic grounding of interaction. With this organic grounding, the recognition of the other as a being with particular interests that I must respect is no longer limited to beings of my species. It becomes the primitive recognition, felt before it can be expressed in consciousness or language, of the other being's interest in continuing to live and in avoiding pain, and indeed the shared pleasure of its feeling pleasure and fulfilment. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's formulations apply particularly well to the *negative*

experiences that make the human-animal intercorporeity so overbearing: the ability of our flesh to feel from within the fear and suffering of non-human beings.

But the capacity of the human body to empathise is not limited to living beings, to animals in particular.⁵⁷ More generally, given that the 'circuit' of the human body closes it upon itself via the mediation of the whole perceived world, Merleau-Ponty can conclude that "the flesh of the body makes us understand the flesh of the world."⁵⁸ We saw that Mead's theory of perception could be taken in that direction. Merleau-Ponty came amazingly close to Mead's theory of the organic response to visual perception through the anticipation of a contact experience. He put it in terms of an essential 'libidinality' of human perception, the fact that perception, by dealing with the inside of things, is always a form of introjection and projection of the things in us and of us in them. He thus describes perception as "penetration, at a distance, of the sensible things by my body," a good, condensed formulation of Mead's theory of perception.⁵⁹ The conclusion is once again eloquently put by Merleau-Ponty: "*Einfühlung* with the world, with the things, with animals, with other bodies."⁶⁰ The openness and reflexivity of the human body's corporal schema enables it to feel in its flesh the weight and specific quality not just of other living beings, but of all sensible entities, landscapes and environment, plants, and even inert objects. Beyond the immediate normative gain that is made with the inclusion of other living beings and natural entities in the model of interaction, the fruitfulness of a model demonstrating our '*Einfühlung* with things' is only too clear in the context of a reappraisal of the role of the object. Merleau-Ponty's theory of intercorporeity provides the conceptual framework that is needed for re-centring the theory of praxis on its properly material dimensions. It shows why 'things' matter to human beings, not just as symbols of social relations, but also for themselves, in their very materiality, why human beings depend on them as necessary tools and means (mediations) for the constitution of their identity and why they even have some normative importance, one that is not (or should not be) as great as that of living beings, of course, but one that is not null either. Merleau-Ponty's theory of intercorporeity, complementing Mead's theory of practical intersubjectivity, gives a crucial indication as to the way in which the paradigm of recognition can overcome its self-imposed limits and include in its analyses first of all those beings and natural entities that have (or should have) intrinsic value, but also

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the overbearing, material weight of the world, an aspect of reality that classical philosophers, and amongst them the great theorists of praxis, never let out of their sight.

Notes

- ¹ Axel Honneth & Hans Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, trans. R. Meyer, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 1.
- ² Reprinted at the end of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. Shapiro, Oxford, Polity Press, 1987, pp. 301-350.
- ³ Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, trans. K. Baynes, Cambridge, MA, & London, MIT, 1991, chapter 7, pp. 203-239, and the beginning of chapter 8, pp. 240-247.
- ⁴ Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 154. This analysis refers specifically to *Theory and Practice*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1973.
- ⁵ This explains the fact that Habermas continues to use anthropological arguments in his latest books, for example in *The Future of Human Nature*.
- ⁶ See in particular the second series of 'Intermediate reflections' in the *Theory of Communicative Action*, chapter VI, trans. T. McCarthy, Cambridge, Polity, vol. 1 1984, vol. 2, 1987.
- ⁷ Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 161.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- ⁹ Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, p. 281.
- ¹⁰ Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 15.
- ¹¹ The most explicit discussion of this shift by Honneth, from a linguistic understanding of intersubjectivity to a 'broader anthropological analysis', can be found in "Anerkennungsbeziehungen und Moral. Eine Diskussionsbemerkung zur anthropologischen Erweiterung der Diskursethik," in *Anthropologie, Ethik und Gesellschaft*, eds. R. Brunner & P. Kelbel, Frankfurt & New York, Campus Verlag, 2000, pp. 101-111.
- ¹² The quote is taken from the German volume *Kultur und Kritik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1973, p. 234.
- ¹³ Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 85.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- ¹⁶ Christopher Zurn, "Anthropology and Normativity: A Critique of Axel Honneth's 'Formal Conception of the Ethical Life'," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2000, pp. 115-24.
- ¹⁷ Axel Honneth, "Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions," *Inquiry*, 45, 2002, pp. 500-503.

- ¹⁸ Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 70.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1938, pp. 143-144.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act*, p. 442 (my emphasis).
- ²³ Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 70.
- ²⁴ Although he is obviously interested in human communication, Mead finds the basic structure of 'social acts' already in the interactions between higher animals (the famous dog-fight example at the beginning of *Mind, Self and Society*).
- ²⁵ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1934, Introduction, p. 2 (my emphasis).
- ²⁶ I am particularly indebted to Stéphane Haber's enlightening discussion of the ecological in Habermasian ethics. See "Ethique de la Discussion et Réconciliation avec la Nature," in *Où en est la Théorie Critique?* eds. E. Renault and Y. Sintomer, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, pp. 219-234.
- ²⁷ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. J. Anderson, Cambridge, Polity, 1995, p. 179.
- ²⁸ Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, pp. 2-3.
- ²⁹ Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, p. 179.
- ³⁰ Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 155.
- ³¹ This has been well highlighted and rectified by Emmanuel Renault, see *L'Expérience de l'Injustice. Reconnaissance et Clinique de l'Injustice*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, especially chapter 3, pp. 179-246. The retrieval of *material* mediations in the model of interaction used by the ethics of recognition is the pendant to Renault's attempt to give more weight to *institutional* mediations.
- ³² Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 61.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ The critical perspective presented here therefore differs greatly from those critiques, most famously expressed by Manfred Frank and Dieter Henrich, which attack 'a priori intersubjectivism' on the basis of the irreducibility of subjectivity.
- ³⁵ This is the term used by the translator of *Social Action and Human Nature* to render *gegenständlich* as opposed to *objektiv*.
- ³⁶ To recall, these aspects of the 'objective' world which praxis has to confront have been particularly well analysed by Sartre in the first book of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.
- ³⁷ See Honneth's contribution in the polemic with Joel Whitebook, "Facetten des vorsozialen Selbst. Eine Erwiderung auf Joel Whitebook," *Psyche*, 55, 2001, pp. 790-802; and also "Postmodern Identity and Object-relations Theory: On

the Supposed Obsolence of Psychoanalysis," *Philosophical Explorations*, 2, 1999, pp. 225-242; and "Das Werk der Negativität. Eine psychoanalytische Revision der Anerkennungstheorie," in *Die Gegenwart der Psychoanalyse—Die Psychoanalyse der Gegenwart*, eds. Bohleber & Sibylle Dews, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 2001, pp. 238-245.

³⁸ I obviously refer to Habermas' famous early characterisation, and rejection, of the centrality of Nature in first generation Critical Theory: "In several passages Marcuse is tempted to pursue this idea of a New Science in connection with the promise, familiar in Jewish and Protestant mysticism, of the 'resurrection of fallen nature'. This theme, well known for having penetrated into Schelling's (and Baader's) philosophy via Schwabian Pietism, returns in Marx's Paris Manuscripts, constitutes today the central thought of Bloch's philosophy, and, in reflected forms, also directs the more secret hopes of Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno," *Technology and Science as 'Ideology' in Toward a Rational Society*, trans. J. Shapiro, Boston, Beacon Press, 1970, p. 85. Since Thomas McCarthy's thorough review of Habermas' early work, the place of nature is a well-known crux of Habermas' thought. See T. McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, London, Hutchinson, 1978, pp. 110-126. See also the article by Joel Whitebook, "The problem of Nature in Habermas," *Telos*, Summer 79, pp. 41-69. See also the revisiting of these problems from the point of view of recent Schelling scholarship in Peter Douglas, "Habermas, Schelling and Nature," in *Critical Theory after Habermas*, eds. D. Freundlieb, Wayne Hudson & John Rundell, Leiden & Boston, Brill, 2004, pp. 155-180.

³⁹ Particularly enlightening on both dimensions is the work of French sociologist Christophe Dejours, for example *Le Facteur Humain*, Paris, PUF, 2002.

⁴⁰ An important contribution was György Márkus' reconstruction of Marx's anthropology, *Marxism and Anthropology: The Concept of Human Essence in the Philosophy of Marx*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1978. *Social Action and Human Nature* suggests that Márkus' classical study provides the type of solution that Honneth is himself attempting to devise.

⁴¹ Honneth, "Grounding Recognition," pp. 502-503. Importantly, Honneth does not want to abandon the focus and resources provided by philosophical anthropology.

⁴² Honneth and Joas recognised the value of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception but Honneth has not pursued this line further. See *Social Action and Human Nature*, pp. 114-115.

⁴³ In fact the *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. C. Smith, London, Routledge, 1962 (first edition), pp. 442-456) finished with a normative theory of praxis. More topically dedicated to these questions was of course the *Adventures of the Dialectic*.

⁴⁴ Obviously the chapter on intersubjectivity in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (pp. 346-368) is the central text to find the explicit exposition of Merleau-Ponty's

theory of communication. In it, Merleau-Ponty sets philosophy the following task: “we must learn to find the communication between one consciousness and another in one and the same world,” p. 353. More broadly, however, given that for him communication is not restricted to linguistic exchange but is another word for the fundamental sharing of the world by the embodied subjects, the thematic of communication, encapsulated in the ‘co-’ words (coexistence, commonality, communion, consubstantiation, *con-naissance* as ‘co-birth’, etc.) runs through the whole book and in fact through all of Merleau-Ponty’s writings.

- ⁴⁵ See Sandra B. Rosenthal and Patrick L. Bourgeois, *Mead and Merleau-Ponty. Toward a Common Vision*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1991.
- ⁴⁶ This is obviously Merleau-Ponty’s methodology in *The Structure of Behaviour*, but also in his lectures at the Collège de France, which we will now refer to more specifically. See M. Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, trans. R. Vallier, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2003. See also the ‘working notes’ at the end of *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968, pp. 165-276. I focus especially on these lectures rather than *The Visible and the Invisible* because they illustrate perfectly the grounding of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of intercorporeity in contemporary natural sciences.
- ⁴⁷ Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, p. 77.
- ⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty follows Lorenz’s studies of the rituals amongst animals, and, like Mead who described animal “conversations through gestures” as “social acts”, argues that “one can talk of an animal culture” and of “animal institutions” (*Nature*, p. 198).
- ⁴⁹ “We have to take into account (. . .) what goes on in the central nervous system as the beginning of the individual’s act and as the organisation of the act,” *Mind, Self and Society*, p. 11.
- ⁵⁰ Only the external world can teach the I-body to see itself as an object-body. Merleau-Ponty argues in exactly the same way; see for example *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 322.
- ⁵¹ Through a close reading of von Uexküll, he actually sees the emergence of this in the superior animals, see *Nature*, pp. 170-173.
- ⁵² Recall the example of the hand touching the other hand in Mead.
- ⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, p. 209.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 218. One working note even uses the term ‘interanimality’, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 172. A vivid illustration can be found in one of Mead’s smaller articles, see G. H. Mead, “Concerning Animal Perception,” in *Selected Writings*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp. 73-81.
- ⁵⁶ However, Merleau-Ponty is at pains to stress that this ‘empathy’ is not to be equated

with a fusional reconciliation with nature. Especially clear on this: *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 127.

⁵⁷ We should not forget that ethnobotanics has described extensively the ‘companionship’ that has evolved between human beings and the plants surrounding them. See Pierre Lieutaghi, *La Plante Compagne*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1999.

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, p. 218. Logically, the relationship is reciprocal: “it is already the flesh of the things that speaks to us of our own flesh, and that speaks to us of the flesh of the other,” *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 193. Once again, it is important to stress the rigorous scientific underpinning of Merleau-Ponty’s arguments and not to be fooled by their literary quality. On the scientific origin and aims of the theory of intercorporeity, see the working note of February 1959, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 182.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, p. 218.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, p. 209.