

# Psychoanalysis and the Methodology of Critique

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In his introduction to *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse distinguishes his philosophy of psychoanalysis from psychoanalytic therapy by explaining that the former aims “not at curing individual sickness, but at diagnosing the general disorder.”<sup>1</sup> With this claim, Marcuse expresses a thought that has run through first, second, and third generation critical theory in different ways; namely, that the methodology of critical theory can be understood as being somehow analogous to psychoanalytic technique. This analogy holds that the critical theorist stands in relation to the pathological social order as the analyst stands in relation to the analysand, and that the aim of critical theory is to effect the diagnosis and, ultimately, the cure of social disorders or pathologies.

This idea was famously developed in careful detail in Jürgen Habermas’s early work, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (KHI).<sup>2</sup> There, Habermas defined psychoanalysis as a science of “methodical self-reflection” (KHI, 214), that is, as a form of depth hermeneutics that aims to analyze those aspects of the self that have been alienated from the self and yet remain part of it. In other words, it aims to analyze what Freud once referred to as the “internal foreign territory” of the unconscious.<sup>3</sup> In KHI Habermas understood the individual psyche in communicative terms; hence, for him, unconscious wishes are those that have been “exclude[d] from public communication,” or “delinguisticized” (KHI, 224), but that continue to disrupt the subject’s communication with him or herself in the form of dreams, slips of the tongue, and other interruptions (KHI, 227). The job of the analyst, on this way of understanding analysis, is to teach the subject to “comprehend his own language” (KHI, 227), and, in so doing, to restore a broken internal dialogue. Psychoanalysis, for Habermas, aims at a self-reflective act of understanding, specifically of those portions of our life history that have been split off or repressed; its goal is thus that of making the unconscious conscious (KHI, 242).

While Habermas acknowledges that self-reflection is both a cognitive process of coming to understand the resistances to making the unconscious conscious and an affective process of dissolving those resistances, and while he discusses the role of transference and working-through in Freud’s understanding of these processes, his account of psychoanalysis nonetheless emphasizes the role of linguistic interpretation and rational insight in the process of self-reflection. Indeed, he famously — and controversially — rejects Freud’s distinction between

thing-presentations and word-presentations and argues that all unconscious contents can be translated into linguistic terms. Such translation work is, for Habermas, central to the work of analysis (KHI, 241–2).<sup>4</sup> Habermas concludes from his discussion that

the analytic power to dissolve dogmatic attitudes inheres in analytic insight. Critique terminates in a transformation of the affective-motivational basis, just as it begins with the need for practical transformation. (KHI, 234)

Critique is, as he puts it, “impelled by a passion for critique,” and this is what gives it the “power to break up false consciousness” (KHI, 234). In other words, on Habermas’s account, although the need for practical transformation compels people to enter analysis, and although analytic insight generates a motivational or affective, which is to say, practical, transformation, what does the work in psychoanalysis is analytic insight — in short, analytic power inheres in analytic insight. In other words, analytic knowledge is key, and this knowledge is “impelled onward against motivational resistances by the *interest in self-knowledge*” (KHI, 235). The relationship between analyst and analysand is, for Habermas, a communicative relationship that aims to bring the patient to self-reflection through a process of enlightenment (KHI, 244).

On the basis of this reading of psychoanalysis, Habermas then offers an account of critique or critical social science as the diagnosis and cure of social pathologies. Like analysis, critical theory is motivated by a practical interest in social transformation and (it is hoped) culminates in such practical transformation, but it works through the mechanism of rational insight. Crediting Freud with this idea, Habermas writes:

For the social system, too, the interest inherent in the pressure of suffering is also immediately an interest in enlightenment; and reflection is the only possible dynamic through which it realizes itself. (KHI, 288)

On this analogy, critique is the process of methodical self-reflection applied at the level of the social whole; it is the attempt to restore a broken or distorted internal dialogue within a society, by restoring open and free communication with those parts that have been internally split off or alienated. It may be guided by an emancipatory interest, that is, an interest in overcoming social suffering, and it may, if all goes well, result in practical transformation, but its power inheres in

critical insight and in a process of communicative, rational enlightenment that leads to self-reflection.

To be sure, Habermas himself abandoned this analogy between critique and psychoanalysis — and the whole idea of anthropologically deep-seated knowledge-constitutive interests with which it was intertwined — not long after the publication of KHI. Around the same time, he also abandoned psychoanalysis altogether, replacing Freud with the cognitive and moral developmental psychology of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Recently, however, Axel Honneth has rehabilitated this analogy and developed it through his account of critical theory as a critique of social pathologies, even going so far as to quietly resuscitate Habermas's notion of the emancipatory interest as the force guides or impels critique. In what follows, I interrogate Honneth's psychoanalytically inspired vision of the methodology of critique. My overall argument is that Honneth, like Habermas before him, has an overly rationalistic understanding of how psychoanalysis works; this, in turn, leads his analogy between analysis and critical theory as the diagnosis and cure of social pathologies to break down in interesting, perhaps even symptomatic, ways.<sup>6</sup> I begin with Honneth's recent account of critical theory as the diagnosis of social pathologies of reason in order to reconstruct his version of the analogy between psychoanalysis and social critique. I then consider Honneth's account of how psychoanalysis works, through a discussion of his reading of Freud's conception of the individual self-relation. Finally, I turn to Freud's papers on analytic technique to draw out the limitations of Honneth's account of how analysis works and to show how these limitations trouble his understanding of the analogy between analysis and critique. I conclude with some suggestions concerning whether and how this analogy should be rethought in light of my critical discussion.

### Critical Theory as the Diagnosis of a Social Pathology of Reason

In order to see how Honneth understands the analogy between critical theory and psychoanalysis, we first need to reconstruct his conception of a social pathology of reason. For Honneth, if critical theory is to avoid the abstract utopianism that plagues normative neo-Kantian theories, it must draw its normative resources from within the existing social world and yet, on the other hand, it must do so without becoming mired in historicism or conventionalism. The key to splitting this difference and mediating effectively between theory and history, for Honneth, is the notion of historical progress, which allows us to view the normative standards that we find within our existing social world justified insofar as they are the outcome of historical learning processes.<sup>7</sup>

For Honneth, critical theory thus relies on a philosophy of history that enables us to understand history “with reason as its guiding thread.”<sup>8</sup> There is, however, no objective teleology here. Honneth makes no claims about the necessity or irreversibility of historical learning processes. Rather, following Kant on this point instead of Hegel, Honneth claims that

the historical past should be understood from a practical point of view: as a process of development whose pathological deformation . . . may be overcome only by initiating a process of enlightenment among those involved. (SPR, 21)

How does Honneth flesh out this idea of a historically evolved and evolving reason? For Honneth, critical theory starts from a stance of negativity, which means both that critical theory begins with the identification of injustices and other social harms and that these injustices and harms count as such inasmuch as they are violations of the necessary conditions for a good or successful life. The formulations of such conditions of violation necessarily, on Honneth's view, presuppose a conception of what counts as an intact state of social relations or the necessary conditions for a good life. Honneth glosses this presupposition as follows: “the cause of the negative state of society is to be found in a deficit in social rationality” (SPR, 22). This state of deficient social rationality is what Honneth calls a social pathology of reason. Honneth grounds this conception of a social pathology of reason in the Hegelian thought that “each successful form of society is possible only through the maintenance of its most highly developed standard of rationality” (SPR, 23). This means that

the members of society must agree that leading a successful, undistorted life together is only possible if they all orient themselves according to principles or institutions that they can understand as rational ends for self-actualization. (SPR, 24)

Social pathologies of reason, on this Hegelian conception, result from a society's inability to express properly the rationality already inherent in its basic institutions, practices and forms of life (SPR, 23).

On Honneth's account, this Hegelian idea of a rational universal that makes possible full societal self-realization and the resulting reading of history with reason as its guiding thread are at the core of the distinctive Frankfurt School approach to critical social theory (SPR, 25). A further distinctive feature of this approach is its attempt to explain these social pathologies of reason sociologically; that is, to understand why those affected by the pathologies diagnosed by the critical theorist often do not recognize themselves in that diagnosis (SPR, 29). This idea perhaps finds its clearest expression in Marx's notion of ideology critique. Because of

the workings of ideology, critical theory must, Honneth writes,

couple the critique of social injustice with an explanation of the processes that obscure that injustice. For only when one can convince the addressees by means of such an explanatory analysis that they can be deceived about the real character of their social conditions can the wrongfulness of those conditions be publicly demonstrated with some prospect of their being accepted. (SPR, 30)

The effects of ideology complicate the unfolding rational potential of historical learning processes, but they do not undermine them completely. For Honneth, the actualization of reason is a conflictual learning process but a learning process all the same.

Although different members of the critical theory tradition have expressed this idea in different ways, “the innermost core of the entire critical theory tradition,” according to Honneth, is the idea that the process of social rationalization unique to modern capitalism leads to pathologies associated with a loss of rational universals (SPR, 33). On this view, capitalism is an obstacle to the “potential of rationality socially latent on the threshold of the modern age” (SPR, 34). In other words, capitalism as a form of social organization blocks or impedes the full social realization of a rationality that has been made possible with the historical emergence of modernity (SPR, 35). An implication of this view is that the potential for emancipation is rooted in the very modern reason whose full realization is blocked or deformed by the capitalist social order (SPR, 36).

As an aside, it is interesting that Honneth doesn't discuss here the early Frankfurt School's engagement with psychoanalysis as a way of explaining the entrenchment and persistence of ideologies, when in fact the early Frankfurt School turned to Freud to supplement Marx precisely because they thought Marxism lacked the kind of social psychology that was necessary to explain how ideologies take hold in the minds of individuals. Instead, Freud comes into Honneth's account in a different way, and it is here that his usage of the analogy between psychoanalysis and social critique becomes manifest. Critical theorists, on Honneth's account, not only share the idea that contemporary capitalism represents a deficient social rationality, one that impedes the realization of the rational potential inherent in modern institutions and practices, they also share a conception of the proper therapy for this social pathology of reason. “The forces that contribute to the overcoming of the social pathology,” Honneth writes, “are supposed to stem from precisely that reason whose actualization is impeded by the form of organization present in capitalist society” (SPR, 36). With this idea, Freud becomes as significant for critical theory as are Hegel, Marx and Weber, for

it is from his psychoanalytic theory that Critical Theory takes the thought that social pathologies must always express themselves in a type of suffering that keeps alive the interest in the emancipatory power of reason. (SPR, 36)

Critical theory, as is well known, assumes an internal connection between theory and practice. On Honneth's account, this means that it views the practical overcoming of social pathologies to be essential to its goals (SPR, 37). As a result, critical theory requires what Honneth calls a

social-psychological theory of the subject that makes intelligible why individuals who themselves are conditioned by a particular way of thinking and practice should be further responsive to the rational content of the theory. (SPR, 36)

In other words, it requires a social-psychological theory that can tell us how critique can be effective in bringing about the kind of social and political transformation that it recommends or envisions. But since Honneth has eschewed the kind of objective teleology or speculative philosophy of history according to which revolutionary consciousness will emerge in the working class when the material conditions have reached the appropriate level of development, the requisite social-psychological theory must be supplied instead by empirical social research. In other words, the standpoint of the proletariat is a dead end. What remains in its wake is the standpoint of “the rationality that the social pathology has distorted but not wholly dispossessed” (SPR, 37). In other words, what remains is the standpoint of modern reason, which has been incompletely realized in modern societies due to the distorting effects of capitalism.

But here a question arises; namely, why should critical theory rest its hopes on rationality when, according to its own theory, contemporary social rationality is highly deformed and pathological? Part of the answer to this question lies in Honneth's faith that modern rationality deserves our normative adherence because it is the outcome of a historical learning process; in other words, Honneth's account of historical progress plays an important role in grounding his conception of the normativity of critical theory.<sup>9</sup> But in response to this question, Honneth also appeals to psychoanalysis and moral psychology “to uncover the motivational roots that sustain the readiness for moral cognition in individual subjects, despite any rational impairment” (SPR, 38). In other words, rationality may be deformed or pathological, but it is not *wholly* deformed, and individual subjects are intrinsically motivated to attempt to more fully realize that rationality that is only partially actualized in their current social order. This latter claim rests on two further points, both of which Honneth finds in the work of Freud. First, deficient rationality leads

to individual suffering because human beings “cannot be indifferent about the restriction of their rational capacities” (SPR, 39). This idea is inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis as a methodological model, specifically by the “Freudian idea that every neurotic illness arises from an impairment of the rational ego and must lead to individual cases of stress from suffering” (SPR, 38). Referring not only to Habermas’s analysis in KHI, but also to Horkheimer’s essay on “History and Psychology” and Adorno’s remarks on suffering in *Negative Dialectics*, Honneth maintains that this idea is “the strongest impetus that Freud provides Critical Theory” (SPR, 39). The second part of the answer is that “the stress from suffering presses toward a cure by means of exactly the same rational powers whose function the pathology impedes” (SPR, 39–40). In other words, just as psychoanalysts must presuppose in their patients a desire to be cured of their neurotic suffering, since this is what brings them to analysis in the first place, critical theorists must presuppose a desire for the healing of social suffering on the part of pathological societies. “Moreover,” Honneth continues,

in each case, the interest in one’s own recovery is supposed to be documented by the readiness to reactivate, against any resistance, those rational powers the individual or social pathology has deformed. (SPR, 40)

Thus, critical theorists, like psychoanalysts, presuppose that their addressees have an implicit interest in a rational explanation or interpretation of the (social) pathology that plagues them, because only the full realization of their inherent rational potential can liberate them from their suffering (SPR, 40).

In other words, critical theory must posit “an interest in full rational realization to continue to exist in human beings, despite the deformation or skewing of social rationality” (SPR, 41). The model for this positing is Freudian psychoanalysis, read in a very Habermasian vein, as resting on an individual interest in rational enlightenment and self-realization that parallels the emancipatory interest that fuels social critique. Indeed, Honneth concludes, without such a “realistic concept of ‘emancipatory interest’,” one that makes central the idea of “an indestructible core of rational responsiveness on the part of subjects,” critical theory has no future (SPR, 42).

### Honneth’s Freud

So far, I have argued that Honneth seeks to recover the idea found in the early work of Habermas of modeling the methodology of critical theory on an analogy with psychoanalysis. On this account, critical theory is to a pathologically deformed society as the analyst is to the neurotically ill analysand; the role of each is to set

in motion, through the operation of rational insight, a new, more rational, mode of self-relation. For Honneth, this more rational mode of self-relation is understood as the fuller realization of the rational potential that is inherent in the individual and in the modern social order, but deformed by neurosis, in the former case, and capitalism, in the latter. In order to get a better idea of how this process of achieving a more rational self-relation is supposed to work at the societal level, through the mechanism of social critique, let us first look more closely at Honneth’s understanding of how psychoanalysis works at the individual level to modify the individual’s self-relation.

Despite constant attacks on psychoanalysis and challenges to its legitimacy, Honneth maintains that there is a central legacy to Freudian theory that is still valid today: namely,

the insight that, to begin with, the human is always a divided, inwardly ruptured being, yet one which, thanks to its inherent interest in extending its ‘inner’ freedom, has the ability to reduce or even overcome that rupturedness through its own reflective activity.<sup>10</sup>

As Honneth reads Freud, it is precisely the desire to appropriate one’s own freedom that forces one to turn to those split off features of one’s own history and attempt to make them one’s own via a process of working through. Freedom, for Freud, requires this critical appropriation of one’s own process of formation. Central to Honneth’s reading is thus the close connection in Freud’s work between individual freedom or autonomy and coming to terms with one’s past through the process of “working through” (AF, 128). Working through the traumas of the past and re-appropriating the split off and repressed contents of one’s unconscious are preconditions for freedom, on Honneth’s reading of Freud.

As Honneth reads him, Freud toggled back and forth between offering a theory of normal subjectivity based on his clinical experience with neurosis and offering a theory of neurosis based on his understanding of normal psychological development. Honneth maintains that, with the benefit of hindsight, we can now see that Freud’s theory is more valuable as a theory of human subjectivity than a clinical approach to treating psychological illness (AF, 129). A key part of Freud’s revised theory of human subjectivity is the thought that even ‘normal’, that is, psychologically healthy individuals, have the potential for pathological behavior at times. In many of his texts, according to Honneth, Freud discerns “in intact psychic life the kind of rupture that is usually suspected only in the psychically ill” (AF, 131–2). In other words, on Freud’s considered view, every subject is a little bit neurotic, which means that his analysis of neurosis can be read as an account of subjectivity per se.

But why should this be the case, especially given that in Freud's early view of neurosis, the source of neurotic symptoms was a repressed trauma, namely, the seduction by the parent? As is well known, Freud later dropped this view and took up a much more subtle position according to which, in most cases, the cause of repression was not the actual event of trauma but rather the child's Oedipal wish for it. Honneth characterizes this later view as follows:

[I]mpulses that the child had to experience as dangerous because they threatened its affective equilibrium were shunted into the unconscious for reasons of self-protection, from whence they produced neurotic symptoms in later life. (AF, 132)

But why does the intact, normal, non-neurotic person also experience repressed wishes? Honneth claims that the answer to this question is to be found in Freud's theory of anxiety, offered in the 1920s.<sup>11</sup> In this account, anxiety is not the result of repression, as Freud had previously thought, but rather the cause. This, in turn, raises the question of what causes anxiety. In response to this question, Freud offers an intersubjective account of the origin of anxiety according to which anxiety results from the child's feelings of fright and endangerment at being abandoned by its primary caregiver. This account emphasizes the high degree of dependence of human infants on their caregivers for survival. This high degree of dependence explains why the presence of the primary caregiver is so important to the infant and why his/her disappearance is experienced as so dangerous. On this account, separation anxiety is thus the originary experience of anxiety, and all later experiences of anxiety are derived from this originary experience.

How, then, does anxiety lead to repression? Because some of the child's wishes are, as Honneth puts it, "experienced as incompatible with the continued existence of the love it longs for" (AF, 136), they reinforce separation anxiety, hence they must be repressed. Because all children are radically dependent on their primary caregivers, they are all prone this anxiety and hence they also experience these wishes that are experienced as incompatible with the continued existence of the love object. Thus, this process of separation anxiety, dangerous wishes, and repression is one that occurs in normal subjects as well. Honneth refers to this as the "normalization of repression" (AF, 137). This means that even the normal subject is one whose rational will is often not under her own command, nor is it transparent to itself because it is subject to the intrusions of alienating wishes. "In such situations, familiar to us all," Honneth writes, "our will constantly seems clouded because it is influenced by compulsions or dependencies whose origin we cannot see clearly" (AF, 137).

Honneth claims that in his late work on anxiety Freud reads these alienating wishes not as "immovable facts of human nature" but rather as restrictions of ego function that can be overcome, where such overcoming of restrictions of ego function is necessary for the realization of freedom (AF, 138). For the neurotic patient this is accomplished through analysis, which Honneth maintains, again following Habermas, works through rational insight: "through the associative interpretations offered by the analyst, the patient is supposed to learn to attain insight into the early childhood causes of its symptoms and, in this way, to regain a certain latitude for its freedom of will" (AF, 138). But how is it to be accomplished for the non-neurotic person? The answer is through what Honneth calls individual self-appropriation, through reflectively coming to terms with and working through one's past. In order to elucidate this process, Honneth maintains, Freud has to shift to the first person point of view, to the question of the self-understanding of individuals who feel themselves to be restricted by unconscious repressions. From this perspective, Freud then offers an account of "the reflective process through which such a recovery is supposed to be possible" (AF, 139). This account forms the core of his account of the individual self-relation (AF, 139). On Honneth's reading, Freud further assumes that we always already engage in this kind of process — it isn't a normative demand issued from the outside. To wit, "every person possesses a deep-seated interest in forming a will that is as free as possible by critically reappraising its own previous history" (AF, 139). The interest in understanding oneself is a function of the ego, which pushes us to "persistently aim to integrate them [i.e., all our mental productions] into a rational whole" (AF, 140).<sup>12</sup> Non-rational wishes and beliefs that are either compulsive or highly unintelligible but that don't quite rise to the level of neurotic symptoms thus prompt the healthy person to engage in a process of dealing with her own life history. In order for this to make sense, Freud thus has to impute to all persons not only an interest in their own freedom but further an interest in producing a will that is as free as possible — that is, a will that is as "free of elements that are unintelligible to us and not willed" as possible — for this interest is what provides us with the motivation for working through our own life history (AF, 141).

Through the process of self-appropriation, "we attempt to make something that is initially alien or unintelligible our own by comprehending it as something previously separated and, hence, ultimately belonging to our person" (AF, 142). This we do by tracing that unconscious wish to the point of negation — that is, to the point in our biography where a certain wish was not pursued because of anxiety about the consequences of pursuing it. This is the moment where the wish was repressed and thus the source of those wishes that cannot

be rationally integrated. To be sure, Honneth acknowledges, as does Habermas, that the process of appropriating these previously split off contents is both intellectual and affective (AF, 143). However, like Habermas, he tends to place more weight on the intellectual aspects of this process. That is to say, he acknowledges that it is not sufficient to come to an intellectual realization of the causal circumstances that resulted in the deformation of our will; we must also, Honneth writes, “learn to accept for ourselves what cognitive insight yields before the process of appropriation can reach a successful conclusion” (AF, 143).<sup>13</sup> Honneth thus draws a distinction between cognitive or intellectual insights, which entail “learning to comprehend the circumstances of repression or what is repressed itself as a fact of one’s own biography” (AF, 143), and affective acceptance, which involves “retrospectively accepting this fact as a motivational element in one’s own personality” (AF, 143). Note that although in Honneth’s account both cognitive insight and affective acceptance are required for a successful process of appropriation, the cognitive process comes first and yields insights that then must be affectively accepted.

What exactly is the content of this cognitive insight that must be affectively accepted for a process of appropriation or working through of one’s past to be successful? Noting that Freud himself is unclear as to whether what must be accepted is the substantive content that has been repressed or merely the fact of its repression, Honneth opts for the latter interpretation. He does this for the simple reason that we have to accept the fact of repression — that repression has happened — before we could accept what it is that has been repressed. Thus he interprets Freud as saying that “affective acceptance of repression” is “the goal and endpoint of self-appropriation” (AF, 144). In other words, the goal is that “we must learn to accept the fact that anxiety about losing the loved person had once necessitated us to repress a threatening wish” (AF, 144). This enables us to “mentally reorganize the content” of our repressed wish and “to give this a propositional form” (AF, 144).

Thus, freedom, on Honneth’s reconstruction of Freud, is a kind of self-relation based on “a protracted and strenuous process of working through and remembering in which we attempt, against persistent resistance, to appropriate retrospectively the previously separated elements of our will” (AF, 144–5). Because, on Honneth’s reading, anxiety plays such a crucial role in generating those repressed wishes — because they were repressed in the first place because they made us anxious about losing our love object — this means that “The human self-relation. . . . consists in the process of self-appropriation of one’s will by affectively admitting to anxiety” (AF, 145).

## How Analysis Works

Honneth’s decision to read affective acceptance as acceptance of the fact of repression rather than acceptance of the content of the repressed wishes is, I think, problematic insofar as it obscures and downplays the role of negativity in the Freudian conception of anxiety on which he draws. After all, what kinds of wishes could be so powerful and destructive that they threaten us with the loss of our love object, which they must do if they are to trigger the kind of separation anxiety that is claimed to be at the root of all repressed wishes? Honneth speaks rather cryptically of wishes that are “experienced as incompatible with the continued existence of the love it longs for” (AF, 136). This sounds to me like a very oblique description of an aggressive or destructive impulse or wish toward the primary caregiver — the wish to destroy them in a rage over having been abandoned by them. But, as I have discussed elsewhere, Honneth is committed to the view that aggression is the result of anxiety, precisely as an argument against the notion of the aggressive or death drive, so he can’t very well say here that is the cause, can he?<sup>14</sup> But what kinds of wishes could be experienced as incompatible with the continued existence of the love object if not aggressive, destructive wishes? Erotic wishes for my primary love object might threaten me with punishment — for violating the incest taboo, for example — but they don’t threaten my love object with destruction.

Also Honneth, at least implicitly, acknowledges something in his discussion of the individual self-relation that proves very destabilizing for his analogy between critical theory and psychoanalysis, and that concerns the role of affect in the process of working through. There’s something unsatisfying about Honneth’s discussion of this role because even as he acknowledges affect, he downplays it. What does the work in Honneth’s account is the cognitive or intellectual insight into the circumstances that have led us to repress certain wishes or impulses. The role of affect is relegated to that of passively accepting the fact that we have repressed those wishes, not the more demanding task of accepting the content of those (destructive) wishes themselves. Furthermore, what’s left out is a more robust and active conception of the role that the transformation of affect plays in the dynamics of working through. Honneth seems to intellectualize affective acceptance by suggesting that its key goal is to mentally reorganize our repressed wishes by giving them propositional form — that is, by accepting the fact that we have repressed something, not by coming to terms with the emotional force of what it is that has been repressed. Honneth also fails to mention that not only is rational insight insufficient for this process but it *actively impedes* that process, serving as one of the ego’s primary

modes of defense against the dangers and threats of such working through.

Freud himself, by contrast, develops a much more robust and active account of the role that affect plays in the process of working through in his writings on clinical technique and particularly on the role of transference therein.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Freud recognized the limitations of the talking part of the talking cure and the importance of transference early on, even as early as 1910. As he puts it in his paper “‘Wild’ Psychoanalysis”:

It is a long superseded idea, and one derived from superficial appearances, that the patient suffers from a sort of ignorance, and that if one removes this ignorance by giving him information. . . . he is bound to recover. The pathological factor is not his ignorance itself, but the root of this ignorance in his *inner resistances*.<sup>16</sup>

The task of treatment is combating resistances and in this battle offering insights or interpretations is, Freud insists, “only one of the necessary preliminaries.”<sup>17</sup> If mere knowledge about the unconscious were as transformative as people think it is, then reading books about psychoanalysis would be sufficient for a cure. But simply reading about psychoanalysis has as much of an impact on the neurotic’s symptoms as “a distribution of menu-cards in a time of famine has upon hunger.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, and more problematically, offering the patient insights into his unconscious “regularly results in an intensification of the conflict in him and an exacerbation of his troubles.”<sup>19</sup> Analysts should, Freud therefore suggests, refrain from offering interpretations until two preconditions are met: first, the patient has already “reached the neighbourhood of what he has repressed”; and, second, the patient has established a transference relationship with the analyst.<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, Freud had himself early on overestimated the effectiveness of insights and interpretations in analysis. As he explains in the important paper, “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through” (1914), his thinking about analytic technique went through a series of transformations, from an early reliance on hypnosis to bring about catharsis, to a later emphasis on the analyst’s interpretations as the means for giving the patient insight into his repressions, to a mature focus on the importance of working through the transference relation. On his mature conception of the analytic situation, the patient does not, as Freud had previously assumed, remember anything about the fact that he has repressed something much less about the content of that repression. Rather, he *repeats* what he has forgotten and repressed, but without being aware that he is doing so. Freud gives some great examples here: the patient who has repressed her defiance toward her parents’ authority acts defiantly toward the doctor; the one who felt ashamed of his infantile sexuality now reproduces that

shame in the face of the analyst and can’t offer productive associations, and so on. As Freud puts it, “as long as the patient is in treatment he cannot escape this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that *this is his way of remembering*.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the transference itself is a kind of repetition, a replaying of dynamics of the affective relationship to the primary caregiver — primarily of love, but also, Freud acknowledges, of hate as well.<sup>22</sup>

The analytic situation, for the mature Freud, is a safe space in which the psychic traumas and deficiencies of that relationship can be affectively relived and worked through. “The main instrument,” he writes,

for curbing the patient’s compulsion to repeat and for turning it into a motive for remembering lies in the handling of the transference. We render the compulsion harmless, and indeed useful, by giving it the right to assert itself in a definite field. We admit it into the transference as a playground in which it is allowed to expand in almost complete freedom and in which it is expected to display to us everything in the way of pathogenic instincts that is hidden in the patient’s mind.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, the goal is to replace the patient’s actual neurosis with a transference neurosis, which can then be dynamically worked through in the analytic situation. This involves something more and also something different from the patient being brought to realize that he has repressed something or even that he continues to produce resistances to uncovering those repressions. Indeed, pointing out the patient’s resistances only makes them that much stronger.<sup>24</sup> The key, rather, is to

allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to *work through* it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it, the analytic work.<sup>25</sup>

This is accomplished affectively, by deepening the transference, even as doing so triggers resistances.

To be sure, the fact that analysis works primarily through the transference introduces dangers to the analytic situation. First there is the danger of the countertransference, which Freud acknowledges but which has achieved much greater prominence in discussions of analytic technique post-Freud.<sup>26</sup> Then there is the danger that the patient will fall in love with the analyst, which Freud discusses in his fascinating paper, “Observations on Transference-Love.” Indeed, it is a bit strange to call this a danger of psychoanalytic technique, since, on his mature conception of that technique, the patient falling in love with the analyst is sort of the point. If the patient doesn’t in *some* sense fall in love with the analyst, then he doesn’t establish the kind of transference relationship that is a necessary precondition for the offering of interpretations and insights. (Importantly, for Freud, *all*

love is transference love). That said, Freud is clear that analysts should not act on the patient's declarations of love, not necessarily because doing so would be unethical, but rather because it would be bad for the analytic process, the whole point of which is to help the patient curb the reign of the pleasure principle in order to fit the demands of the reality principle. Still, the analyst has to cultivate and use the transference in order to enable this overcoming. In this sense, the analyst has to play with fire: "The psycho-analyst knows that he is working with highly explosive forces and that he needs to proceed with as much caution and conscientiousness as a chemist."<sup>27</sup>

Here the explosive dimension of psychoanalysis comes to the fore, in the form of transference, that is, the operation of erotic drives as they play themselves out in the course of analysis itself.<sup>28</sup> Analysis has to work with and to mobilize this explosive content, even as the goal of analysis is to defuse or neutralize that content, bringing it under the rule of the ego and the reality principle. But recall that transference takes both positive and negative forms; positive transference is love, and negative transference is hate and destructiveness. In his late essay, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," Freud acknowledges that the resistances themselves and the negative transference to which they can give rise seem to be rooted in forces equally as explosive as the positive, erotic transference that psychoanalysis mobilizes to effect a cure. "No stronger impression arises from the resistances during the work of analysis," he writes, "than of there being a force which is defending itself by every possible means against recovery and which is absolutely resolved to hold on to illness and suffering."<sup>29</sup> Such forces, he continues, "are unmistakable indications of the presence of a power in mental life which we call the instinct of aggression or of destruction."<sup>30</sup> Analysts must learn how to handle and to work with and through these explosive forces as well.

In other words, what becomes clear in Freud's papers on analytic technique is that psychoanalysis doesn't work, if and when it does work, through rational insight. To be sure, Honneth and Habermas acknowledge that analysis doesn't work through rational insight *alone*, and they do emphasize that there must be a relationship between insight and affect. But they get that relationship precisely backwards. On Freud's mature view of analytic technique, psychoanalysis works first and foremost not through rational insight or interpretation but rather through the dynamic reworking of affect, the working through of internal conflicts and repetition compulsions on the terrain of an affective relationship between analyst and patient. Even if we accept, for the sake of argument, that the end goal of this process is some sort of rational, unified, integrated self where the ego is master of its own house (though Freud was famously

skeptical of whether this is either possible or desirable), the process for getting there is *not* a rational one. Indeed, rational insight is an *impediment* to this process, because it heightens resistances and serves as one of the ego's prime modes of defense. So it isn't that more enlightened, self-reflective insight which is motivated by affective suffering leads, in turn, to motivational change, as Habermas says, but rather that motivational or affective working through in the transference relation between analyst and analysand prepares the way for self-transformative rational insight, serves as its practical condition of possibility. When Habermas says that critique is impelled by a passion for critique, he means that individuals are motivated to engage in critique because of their suffering, which provides them with a practical interest for transformation. But there's a more complex sense in which critique, in Freud's sense, rests on a passion for critique; namely, that critique can't possibly be effective unless the way has affectively prepared for it, by the working through of transference. This working through also goes beyond Honneth's idea of affectively accepting the fact that we have repressed something; namely, our anxiety over our wishes that we experience as incompatible with the continued existence of our love object. Not only does this gloss over what must be the destructive content of those wishes themselves, it also translates the dynamic, affective, experiential work of working through into a kind of propositional content that can be cognitively or intellectually affirmed. As such, it turns a blind eye to the explosive content that Freud locates in the transference relation.

## Conclusion

In closing, what are the implications of this reading of Freud's papers on technique for the analogy between critical theory and psychoanalysis as developed by Habermas and Honneth? If, as I have argued, psychoanalysis does not work through rational insight but rather through the dynamic working through of the explosive content of the transference relation, then this analogy either breaks down or it demands a radically different conceptualization of critical theory than that found in the work of Habermas and Honneth.<sup>31</sup> In other words, *either* the analogy breaks down because the power of critical theory does inhere in rational insight even though the power of analysis does not, *or* the analogy holds but requires a very different understanding of how critical theory works, if and when it works. And this difficulty is deepened if, as I discussed above, it is not only the case that rational insight is insufficient for a free individual self-relation but is actually an impediment to developing such a relation because it serves to heighten resistances to and mobilize defenses against confronting the deeper, affective roots of one's



suffering. If this is right, and if we want to continue to accept the analogy between psychoanalysis and the methodology of critique, then we may have to accept that insofar as critical theory is a project of rational insight or enlightenment, it is not only insufficient for motivating emancipatory social change — a point that probably no one would argue — but that it may actually be counterproductive. In other words, the rational project of offering interpretations or insights into social pathologies may serve either to deepen a society's resistances to the contents of those insights or to mobilize a society's internal defense mechanisms, to allow it to claim to have overcome its pathologies through rational insight and understanding while clinging to them all the more fervently. Like the patient who says "yes, I know, I'm acting that way because I never got enough attention from my alcoholic mother as a child" precisely as a way of *not* working through the traumatic effects of that lack of attention, a society might say "yes, we know, look at how racist our police force is" precisely as a way of *not* working through the traumatic effects of that racism. This is not, of course, to say that critical theory is responsible for the social suffering and pathologies that it attempts to diagnose, only that, if this analogy between psychoanalysis and critical theory holds, it might turn out to be the case that critical theory itself more often than not plays the role of a surface level social defense mechanism that enables social pathologies to remain rooted at a deeper affective level that remains untouched by the rational content of critical theory.

(How) could critical theory harness something like the explosive force that analysts learn to handle in their use of transference and countertransference relations? What would the analogy between critical theory and psychoanalysis look like if we were to conceptualize the analytic situation in less rationalist and cognitivist, more affective and, yes, more explosive, terms?<sup>32</sup> And what sense can critical theorists make of Freud's acknowledgement of the persistent resistance to ending suffering that he takes to be an expression of the death drive? Again, if we take seriously the analogy between psychoanalysis and critical theory, then it follows that just as psychoanalysts must presuppose in their patient's a desire to be cured of their neurotic suffering, since this is what brings them to analysis in the first place, critical theorists must presuppose a desire for the healing of social suffering on the part of pathological societies. Honneth's account of the methodology of critique makes this point explicitly. But note that even without the disruptive, explosive force of the death drive this analogy already starts to break down once again: the crucial difference between analysis and critique being that at least some individuals do seek out analytic treatment, whereas societies, even deeply pathological ones,

perhaps even especially deeply pathological ones, do not necessarily seek out critical theory.

One might attempt to salvage the analogy between critique and psychoanalysis on this point by appealing to the role of social movements or struggles as giving voice to the desire to overcome social suffering, thus as being analogous to the analysand seeking out treatment. Such an account would emphasize the rootedness of social struggles in negative experiences of suffering, and would read such struggles as giving voice to individuals' affective response, their outrage, in the face of such suffering. The role of critical theory would then be to respond to this cry for help by offering rational insights into the causes of social suffering and the possibilities for ameliorating them. Such a reading of Honneth's version of the analogy between critical theory and psychoanalysis would certainly accord well with other aspects of his overall theory.<sup>33</sup> A major difficulty with this proposal is that it points out the limits of the whole notion of the social subject on which this analogy is implicitly based: individuals may be internally divided, but when they seek analytic treatment, they do it as a whole, as it were. As far as the society is concerned, even as the motivation for social transformation is expressed in social struggles, other segments of the society may remain unaware or even in denial about the need for change. However, even if that complicated issue could be resolved, and even if we assume that social struggles should be understood as the equivalent of the analysand seeking out analytic treatment and that these struggles give voice to affective, felt suffering, the main challenge articulated in this paper remains: on the Freudian understanding of how analysis works, a transference relation has to be established first and only on this basis is anything like insight or interpretation possible; without such a transference relation, insight becomes a mechanism for defense. But who could possibly play the role of transference figure for social and political movements, and would we want anyone to be invested with the kind of charismatic authority that tends to inhere in such figures? If, however, we admit that we cannot or ought not extend the notion of transference to social and political movements, then this strategy for salvaging the analogy between critical theory and psychoanalysis becomes problematic.

The central problem seems to me to be this: Honneth's story, not unlike Habermas's, is that critical theory is motivated by a practical interest in social transformation, rooted in negative experiences of suffering and outrage, and culminates in social transformation, but it works through the mechanism of rational insight. The more complex Freudian picture sketched here suggests that *if* the analogy between critical theory and psychoanalysis holds, it is the dynamic reworking of affect, such as one might experience as a participant

in social struggles, that makes social transformation possible, while rational insight, if and when it is available at all, comes only after the fact, like the owl of Minerva flying at dusk. If we want to retain the analogy between psychoanalysis and critical theory, then perhaps the major challenge posed by the reading of psychoanalytic technique offered here is whether critique or critical theory can indeed play a causal role, even an indirect one, in bringing about social transformation.

More troubling still is the fact that Freud's claim that the negative transference relation is an expression of the death drive calls into question Habermas's and Honneth's assumption that the subject is unable to rest content with their own suffering. As Freud well knew, individuals can become very attached to their symptoms. If we continue to accept the analogy between individual and social pathologies, and if the same could be said of societies, then Freud might also lead us to question the very idea of a social subject that has a deep-seated interest in its own emancipation.

### NOTES

1. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 8.
2. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). Henceforth cited in the text as KHI.
3. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXII (1932–1936), trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 57.
4. For a critique of this aspect of Habermas's conception of psychoanalysis, see Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).
5. For critical discussion of this development in Habermas's work, see Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia*.
6. I want to emphasize that my critique of Habermas and Honneth in this paper does not extend to the engagements of earlier members of the Frankfurt School with psychoanalysis. Marcuse and Adorno, in particular, had quite different readings of Freud (different from each other and from Habermas and Honneth) and also different understandings of the import of psychoanalysis for critical theory. These readings and understandings were, in my view, more productive than those of Habermas and Honneth, even if they were still problematic in certain ways, but I won't attempt to argue for those claims here.
7. For his recent articulations of this idea, see Axel Honneth, "The Irreducibility of Progress: Kant's Account of the Relationship between Morality and History" in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, trans. James Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). For critical discussion, see Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), chapter 3.
8. Honneth, "A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory," in *Pathologies of Reason*, 20. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as SPR.

9. As I argue in much more detail in Allen, *The End of Progress*, chapter 3.
10. Honneth, "Appropriating Freedom: Freud's Conception of Individual Self-Relation," in *Pathologies of Reason*, 127. Henceforth cited in the text as AF.
11. See Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XX (1925–1926), trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001).
12. Honneth again follows Habermas here in invoking the idea of a dialogue between the different psychological agencies and suggesting a dialogical test for rational integration: "all the wishes and beliefs that are approved by these two instances' dialogical test procedure [the ethical critique of the superego and the reality testing of the ego] can then count as rational" (AF, 141).
13. Honneth complains that Freud does not adequately explain "how the 'affective process' is to be constituted through which the taking back of repression is actually completed" (AF, 143). I'm not at all convinced that this is a fair criticism of Freud; as I will discuss in the next section: his account of transference seems to be designed to explain precisely this.
14. See Amy Allen, "Are We Driven: Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis Reconsidered," *Critical Horizons* 16 (2015): 311–28. Honneth argues that aggression is the result of anxiety—the anxiety caused by the fear of abandonment by the primary caregiver—in Honneth, "Facets of the Presocial Self: Rejoinder to Joel Whitebook," in Honneth, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).
15. To his credit, Habermas discusses these papers on analytic technique at length in *KHI*, though this does not change its essentially rationalistic reading of Freud. See Habermas, *KHI*, 228–45.
16. Freud, "'Wild' Psychoanalysis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XI (1910), 225.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 226.
21. Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XII (1911–1913), 150. Emphasis added.
22. Freud, "The Dynamics of Transference," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XII (1911–1913), 106. Freud's first known use of the term "ambivalence" appears here, in a reference to the duality of the transference relation, its manifestation as both love and hate, that is, as both positive and negative transference.
23. Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through," 154.
24. *Ibid.*, 155.
25. *Ibid.*
26. For an insightful summary of contemporary psychoanalytic discussions of countertransference, see Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 243–50.
27. Freud, "Observations on Transference Love," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XII (1911–1913), 170.
28. It is worth noting that it was precisely this explosive dimension that drew the first generation of the Frankfurt School to psychoanalysis in the first place. As Marcuse put it

in a 1978 interview, “the crucial point” in the debate between the first generation of the Frankfurt School and the revisionist psychoanalysis that they so vigorously rejected “was and is the explosive content of Freudian instinct theory” (“Theory and Politics: A Discussion with Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Heinz Lubasc, and Telman Spenglar,” *Telos*, 38 (1978–1979): 127). The desire to downplay the explosive nature of psychoanalysis thus further distinguishes Habermas’s and Honneth’s engagements with this tradition from that of the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

29. Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXIII (1937–1939), 242.

30. *Ibid.*, 243.

31. In his introduction to the volume *Theory and Practice*, responding to critics of *KHI*, Habermas himself acknowledges many of the limitations of his analogy between psychoanalysis and critique, and clarifies that he intends that analogy to extend only to the relationship between psychoanalytic dialogue and critical self-reflection, not all the way to social or political struggles for emancipation. See Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 25–40. If, however, as I have argued, the analogy between psychoanalysis and critical theory breaks down even at the level of critique itself, then the problem with the analogy runs deeper than Habermas admits. For further critical discussion of the limits of the analogy between psychoanalysis and critical

theory in Habermas’s early work, see Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 211–13.

32. For an interesting attempt to answer these questions, see Mark Warren, “The Self in Discursive Democracy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. Stephen White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 167–200.

33. The best statement of the role of social struggles in his theory of recognition is still Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995). For a discussion of the role of outrage in Honneth’s theory, see Mattias Iser, *Empörung und Fortschritt: Grundlagen einer kritischen Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Maine: Campus, 2008). Habermas, for his part, is, as I noted above, explicitly skeptical about extending the analogy between psychoanalysis and critical theory to cover social and political struggles for emancipation, for reasons similar to those sketched below. For his discussion of this issue, see Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 28–32.

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