

# Alienation Reconsidered. Criticizing Non-Speculative Anti-Essentialism

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## Resumen

### Consideraciones sobre la Alienación. Críticas al anti-esencialismo no especulativo

Afortunadamente, ahora se toma nuevamente en serio el desafío de la alienación en las discusiones intelectuales. Hace ya años, Axel Honneth hizo de la reflexión sobre la alienación un tema definitorio para la filosofía social en sí misma y presentó, como ejemplo principal de la filosofía social, la teoría crítica. En este horizonte, Rahel Jaeggi y Hartmut Rosa han propuesto recientemente dos concepciones de alienación. El presente artículo cuestiona estas dos propuestas, criticando en particular su anti-esencialismo. Por un lado, al cuestionar la agenda post-metafísica que Jaeggi ha heredado de Honneth, se critica la yuxtaposición de la crítica existencialista y marxista de la alienación, su comprensión de la buena vida como autonomía y, finalmente, su aceptación de la crítica postmoderna y liberal de la metafísica y la ontología. Por otro lado, en cuanto a Rosa, se analiza su enfoque social de la crítica de la alienación, enfatizando el significado de la modernidad capitalista. Pero él también acepta la agenda post-metafísica. Su idea estética de la buena vida como resonancia sigue siendo fuertemente individualista. Ambas concepciones de alienación tienen, por lo tanto, implicaciones ideológicas que amenazan con cambiar las intenciones e implicaciones originales de la teoría crítica en relación con la justicia social y política. Para concluir, se enfatiza que la crítica del capitalismo, la economía política y la política de la vida real siguen siendo relevantes para comprender la alienación, y por lo tanto, vale la pena volver a los clásicos de la discusión.

**Palabras claves:** “alienación”, “Teoría crítica”, “agenda post-metafísica”, “capitalismo” y “economía política”.

## Abstract

Fortunately, the challenge of alienation is now again taken seriously in intellectual discussions. Already years ago, Axel Honneth made the reflection on alienation a defining issue for social philosophy *per se*, and as the prime example of social philosophy, he brought forth Critical Theory. Within this horizon, recently two conceptions of alienation have been proposed by Rahel Jaeggi and Hartmut Rosa, and the present article takes issue with both of these proposals, criticizing in particular their anti-essentialism. Hence, questioning the post-metaphysical agenda that Jaeggi has inherited from Honneth, I criticize her juxtaposition of the existentialist and the Marxist critique of alienation, her understanding of the good life as autonomy, and finally her acceptance of post-modern and liberal criticism of metaphysics and ontology. Turning to Rosa, I appreciate his societal approach to the critique of alienation, emphasizing the significance of capitalist modernity, but also he accepts the post-metaphysical agenda, and his aesthetic idea of the good life as resonance remains strongly individualistic. Both of these conceptions of alienation thus have ideological implications that threatens to turn upside down the original intentions and implications of Critical Theory in relation to social and political justice. To conclude, the criticism of capitalism, political economy and real life politics is still relevant for understanding alienation, and therefore it is worth returning to the classics of the discussion.

**Keywords:** “alienation”, “Critical Theory”, “post-metaphysical agenda”, “capitalism” and “political economy”.

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# Alienation Reconsidered. Criticizing Non-Speculative Anti-Essentialism

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## 1. Introduction

Fortunately, the challenge of alienation is now again taken seriously in intellectual discussions. Already years ago, Axel Honneth made reflections on alienation a defining issue for social philosophy *per se*, and as the prime inheritor of the social philosophical tradition, he offered Critical Theory (see, e.g., Honneth 2000). Even though I believe these definitions to be reductive,<sup>1</sup> alienation is important to come to terms with and it is a core issue for Critical Theory. Moreover, adding to the fortune, two contemporary critical theorists, Rahel Jaeggi and Hartmut Rosa have both recently dealt extensively with alienation in, respectively, *Entfremdung* (i.e. *Alienation*) from 2005 and *Resonanz* (*Resonance*) from 2016,<sup>2</sup> and the ground should therefore be well prepared for my own modest endeavours.

Unfortunately, however, I do not find the approaches of these two highly esteemed colleagues to this important topic very helpful. The former, i.e. Jaeggi, thus characterizes alienation with an emphasis on the lack of autonomy, but neglects the relevant implications of capitalism and its social structure; the latter, i.e. Rosa, acknowledges that capitalism plays a determinant role, but refuses to reflect conceptually on the substance of the matter; instead, alienation reflects a frustrated desire for worldly resonance. Both appear to be content with an experiential and

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<sup>1</sup> See my discussion in Sørensen 2019, Interlude, sect. E.

<sup>2</sup> See Jaeggi 2005 and Rosa 2016. In the present chapter, the following page references will be indicated in brackets in the text as, respectively, EN, nn and RE, nn. Both books have already been published in English: Jaeggi 2014 and Rosa 2019.

empiricist argument, consequently subscribing to the post-metaphysical and anti-essentialist agenda of contemporary Critical Theory,<sup>3</sup> and this, I would claim, from a practical point of view, blocks the conceptual possibility of overcoming the challenge of alienation, not only historically through revolution or reform, but also through education.

The overall argument in the present article is that by only offering concepts for a positivist empiricist diagnosis of experienced phenomena, neither Jaeggi nor Rosa can provide the basis for a real solution – and a solution is what we aim for in politics and education. In fact, I will claim that their approach becomes ideological in the sense that their empiricist positivism makes it difficult to ground normatively both social critique and political action, and for the education needed for both. As a result, both scholars provide, I would claim, only alienated conceptions of alienation. Accordingly, in a work still in the making (see Sørensen 2020a), I propose reintroducing realist arguments from some older predecessors in the field, i.e. Marx, Herbert Marcuse and Andre Gorz.

In the present argument, however, I will restrict myself to the following: Questioning the post-metaphysical agenda that Jaeggi has inherited from Honneth (A.), I criticize her juxtaposition of the existentialist and the Marxist critique of alienation, her emphasis on the good life as autonomy, and, finally, her acceptance of post-modern and liberal criticism of metaphysics and ontology (B.). Turning to Rosa, I appreciate his societal approach to the critique of alienation, emphasizing the significance of capitalist modernity (C.); however, he also accepts the post-metaphysical agenda, and his aesthetic idea of the good life as resonance remains strongly individualistic (D.). Both of these conceptions of alienation thus have ideological implications that threatens to turn upside down the original intentions and implications of Critical Theory in relation to social and political justice (E). To conclude, the practically oriented criticism of capitalism, political economy and real-life politics is still relevant for understanding alienation, and therefore it is worth returning to the classics of the discussion.

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<sup>3</sup> For my arguments in this regard, see the Interlude, sect. D in Sørensen 2019.

## 2. Anti-Essentialism and Ordinary Language Philosophy Accept Existing Conditions

As Jaeggi tells the story, the 20<sup>th</sup> century discussion of alienation peaked in the 1980s and then suddenly almost disappeared as postmodernity and political liberalism overtook the agenda, maybe because “victorious capitalism” made the critique of alienation seem “hopeless” (EN, 11). Having thus demonstrated her understanding of how the ideological role of specific beliefs may change according to the changing societal totality, it comes as no surprise that she then insists that alienation nevertheless must be a fundamental concern for social philosophy, believing it to be a concept “both full of content and productive” (EN, 12). In continuation, she mentions the roots of alienation in the “Hegelian-social-philosophical component” of “Critical Theory” and recognizes that for Marx, alienation from oneself is intrinsically linked to the alienation from the “social world”, i.e. that “world-alienation means self-alienation and vice versa” (EN, 14).

The surprise comes when Jaeggi refuses to take up directly the “theory tradition” of the original discussion, arguing that instead we need “a critical reconstruction of its conceptual foundation” (EN12). Such a reconstruction allegedly aims to clarify the conceptual meaning of alienation *per se*, while at the same time reinterpreting and transforming it conceptually in order to “regain its experiential content”. The reconstruction thus intends to offer a “categorical analysis of the foundational concepts and of the preconditions that lay the foundation for the interpretative pattern beneath the different variations of alienation.” (EN, 13)

Having discarded the 20<sup>th</sup>-century discussion *en bloc*, instead Jaeggi adopts a reconstruction that employs “everyday use as well as the philosophical use of the concept alienation”. That, however, entails three interconnected problems: Firstly, it appears that she, by adopting this ordinary language approach, does not clearly distinguish between word and concept, or phenomenon and idea as Plato would put it. Secondly, this conflation makes her vulnerable to the mistake of accepting uncritically, and as the only possibility, the current use of the word alienation, i.e. the one that, according to herself, has succumbed to postmodernity and political liberalism. Moreover, this risk of simply adopting the dominating liberal ideology is

accentuated even more by a third problematic feature, namely that she understands her “descriptions of situations” as a “phenomenology” of alienation that can “provide the point of departure for the conceptual reconstruction of the concept.” (EN, 16)

The problem is, I would claim, the reconstructive approach that she has inherited from Honneth.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence of this approach, Jaeggi runs the risk of raising to universal conceptual validity the meaning of words that are very particular, incidental and maybe even, i.e. by reference to the said theoretical tradition, ideological. And ideology in this tradition, i.e. for Marx *et al.*, is opposed to science (see, e.g., Marx and Engels 1969, 18): it is particular and only of limited validity, and not being the whole truth ultimately means being false (see, e.g., Marx and Engels 1969, 13; see also, e.g., Dahm 1972, 39-44). In other words: Jaeggi takes for granted a linguistic reality already distorted ideologically by capitalist relations of production. Re-invoking classical Critical Theory, one can refer to one of the works mentioned by Jaeggi herself, namely Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*. Here, it is argued that ordinary language philosophy accepts the terms of language “in the repressive context of the established universe of discourse,” (Marcuse 1968, 191; see also Sørensen 2019, ch. 7, sect. B) consequently reproducing “the established reality in its repressive and irrational structure.” (Marcuse 1968, 183) As Marcuse emphasizes, acknowledging the dialectics of Plato, “the real context, in which the particular subjects obtain their real significance, is definable only within a *theory* of society,” (Marcuse 1968, 190) i.e. the Critical Theory of society. Moreover, such a theory requires imagination, reflection and speculation rather than descriptive phenomenology and experiential content, i.e. reason rather than empirical perception.

Being thus from the outset rather sceptical towards Jaeggi’s reconstructive investigation of alienation, I will nevertheless address some of her main points, acknowledging that even though her beliefs may be ideological, the recognition and success of her analysis is a strong indication of her approach being widely recognized and therefore worth dealing with. From the outset, Jaeggi insists that her

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<sup>4</sup> For a critical discussion of Honneth’s reconstructive method, see Schaub 2015.

approach has to be formal rather than substantial, and that she aims to overcome problems connected to essentialism, perfectionism, the idea of human nature, etc. (see EN, 19). Endorsing these well-known *foci* in contemporary Critical Theory, she demonstrates that the collaboration with Honneth has left its marks (see EN, 17). Hence, in his short preface to Jaeggi's work, Honneth himself touches upon the question of essentialism no less than six times (see Honneth 2005), this obviously being a major concern of his. As I shall return to below, this is also the case for Rosa.

However, postponing for the moment the possible problems concerning this approach, Jaeggi is right in taking alienation to say something about our relations to the world and to ourselves. Initially, she determines alienation as an "unrelational relation" (EN, 19), i.e. not a total lack of a relation, but a defunct relation. As Jaeggi sees it, alienation can be taken to refer to a bundle of phenomena, ranging from simply being indifferent to things, human beings or the world as such, thus feeling unrelated, to being divided or torn apart in the strong sense employed by Hegel (see also Hegel 1970, 374-89 and my discussion in Sørensen 2015b). Furthermore, being alienated can also signify being transformed from an active subject to a passive object at the mercy of unknown powers.

For Jaeggi, alienation is clearly a "concept" with "diffuse borders" (EN, 21). For me, the point is that the *word* 'alienation' does indeed refer to a broad range of phenomena, e.g. to a kind of artificiality in contrast to authenticity, to the dissolution of social relations or simply isolation, and to dehumanization due to instrumental or objectified relations, or due to the societal division of labour. It may even refer to the impotency perceived in relation to social institutions or norms, or to the absurdity and senselessness depicted in existentialist literature and drama. Interestingly, however, Jaeggi says nothing about the legal aspect of alienation in relation to possession or property, as it is expressed by the idea of inalienable rights; this is probably due to the asymmetry between the German *Entfremdung* and the English alienation, but I will address this discussion in other contexts (see Sørensen 2020a and 2020b). Be that as it may; all of this of course complicates determining the *concept* of alienation.

### 3. Existentialism and Empiricism Blur the Societal Conditions of the Malaise

In one sense, alienation may be considered the pathology of civilisation *par excellence*, classical references being, apart from Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, also Schiller and Kierkegaard. Interestingly, Jaeggi does notice that both Kierkegaard and Marx think of alienation in terms of possession and property, i.e. as a failure to acquire or appropriate something, just as she, with reference to Karl Löwith's classical work *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, considers the thoughts of both to be antropologizations of Hegel (see Löwith 1950, 143; here quoted from EN, 26), although emphasizing different aspects of human nature and reality. For the former, i.e. Kierkegaard, what must be appropriated is one-self and one's history, whereas the latter, i.e. Marx, according to Jaeggi, stresses the importance of both "world and self-appropriation as the counter-model to alienation." (EN, 26)

Adding to Hegel's idea of the divisiveness of the unhappy consciousness that cannot recognize itself in reality, neither in work nor enjoyment (see, e.g., Hegel 1970, 170-71), as Jaeggi mentions, for the young Marx of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, alienation thus in particular means a troubled relationship in the societal production process. Hence, when working, we cannot appropriate, or identify with, neither the products of this work nor our own productive activity or the conditions for the societal production. Based on this approach to the problem of alienation, Marx himself developed the idea of the commodity fetish as a characteristic of capitalism, i.e. "the universality of the commodity form" (EN, 27) in social and societal relations, making us all regard others in terms of instrumentality and ultimately demand and supply. Furthermore, it was in developing this idea that Lukács gave us the concept of reification, which proved so crucial for the first-generation Critical Theory, as also related by Habermas and in much greater detail (see Habermas 1988, vol. 1, part IV).

I will return to the question of reification below in relation to Rosa; the point here is that Jaeggi has unquestionably identified quite well the bundle of phenomena and traditions that constitute the current use of the word alienation. The problem occurs when she continues her reconstruction of the conceptual idea of alienation by



distinguishing, and hypostatizing, as equally fundamental two very different tendencies in the understanding of alienation: one considering it typical for capitalist relations of production, the other viewing it as an existential condition. Following up on the juxtaposition of Marx and Kierkegaard just mentioned, she positions ideas stemming from the young Marx and Heidegger on an equal footing, emphasizing “parallels” in their “critique of alienation” (EN, 34).

The result is a reconstruction that privileges a story of alienation as originally discussed in relation to human nature, but now, as we have entered the post-metaphysical epoch, is rather to be understood as a kind of experience or feeling. Although she includes classical Marx references in the discussion, she nevertheless makes light of the role of history and economy, and rather than private property, the focus is on Marx’s “anthropology of work” (EN, 32). For this reason, she manages to sidestep the traditional Marxist discourse of alienation being characteristic of a special historical formation of society, i.e. capitalism, accumulating surplus value exploited from the working class. This displacement blurs the fact that when a certain malaise of a societal formation is historical, it can also be overcome, be that by revolution, reform or education, and in contrast to Jaeggi, I will insist on this possibility (see further Sørensen 2020a).

Instead, Jaeggi highlights another dichotomy between interpretations of alienation, i.e. one with essentialist or metaphysical implications and the other with experientialist or empiricist ditto, the latter as a “concept”, or an “interpretative pattern”, enabling us individually “to perceive, judge or understand aspects of the world” that would otherwise have been remained out of reach. Thus considered, she sums up her reconstruction of alienation as encompassing the “loss of meaning” implied by the experience of powerlessness or “impotence”. Alienation is the result of a “dominance relation” that is not fully grasped by the usual descriptions of “heteronomy” (EN, 40), hence, not being free, but precisely an alien and therefore not completely unrelated. Alienation is a loss of autonomy or positive freedom in Berlin’s sense, i.e. the inability to realize certain values, or, in other words, the problems encountered in relation to coming-to-terms-with-one-self, appropriating-one-self or attributing-to-one-self (see EN, 53-54), i.e. a rather existential interpretation.

As Jaeggi argues, the return to the classical discussion of alienation is mainly inhibited by two dominant intellectual discourses, namely political liberalism and poststructuralism, the former criticizing substantialist notions of the good life, the latter questioning the subject behind the idea of alienation (see EN, 46). Interestingly, however, Jaeggi apparently accepts both of these allegations as *fait accomplis*. Hence, what she finds problematic is the ideal of an essential, non-alienated human being in a non-alienated society, presupposing as equally problematic “ideals of transparency and reconciliation” (EN, 45). Moreover, she turns against the “objectivist perfectionist ethics” that she attributes to Marcuse, thus criticizing his idea of “false consciousness” as implying claims to superior knowledge, i.e. “paternalism” (EN, 47). From Foucault, she gets the idea of the impossibility of fundamentally distinguishing between oneself and the other, or what is one’s own and what is strange or alien, consequently undermining the normative ideal of an unalienated, autonomous subject and making alienation “constitutive and unavoidable” (EN, 50) for modern society as such.

Instead of ethical objectivism, Jaeggi argues for “qualified subjectivism” (EN, 58), returning ultimately to the specific wishes of particular individuals. Important are the desires and deeds of real, existing people, not the realization of human nature. An analysis of alienation must look for the sources disturbing our relations to the world and our-selves, taking for granted neither the idea of an essential human appropriation of reality nor the “unrelated relationship” (EN, 59). The result of the analysis is that, first of all, alienation consists in the experience of not having control of one-self or not being able to dispose of one-self, both in the theoretical and the practical sense. This being the basic experience, Jaeggi also points to the relation to the world, emphasizing that the “alienation from one-self is an alienation from the world” and that “indifference” is a kind of alienation. Most important for her, however, is the distinction between interior and exterior; she insists that “the interior life is an interior world” (EN, 184). Finally, she stresses that her subjectivism, rather than passive identification of the self with the world, implies a subject actively appropriating the world, and that her own diagnosis remains “levitating between subjectivism and objectivism”, neither given without interpretation nor completely

contingent, but pointing towards the “sublation of alienation” as an “unfinishable process open to events” (EN, 185).

Hence, Jaeggi reconstructs alienation on the basis of empirical phenomena, but ultimately, she makes it a universal phenomenon, i.e. a necessary phenomenon of the life of the individual in modernity, thus approaching the original civilization critique of Rousseau and the that of Hegel in his *Phenomenology*. Moreover, by letting alienation depend on the relation between two fundamental pillars of human reality, self and world, and by understanding the two as so closely interrelated in term of meaning and sense, she relates to Heideggerian ontology rather than Marxian anthropology. This may be why it is so important for Jaeggi to emphasize her allegiance to non-essentialism and to distance herself from metaphysics. In this way, she insists on autonomy as the ‘other’ of alienation to be constituted by an infinite process of events rather than a set of conscious actions, just as she insists on ignoring metaphysics and remain in the “world of representations” (EN, 50). And even though she emphasizes the importance of autonomy, she hesitates to claim it as a normative ideal (see EN, 50-51).

The overall result is therefore not very clear. In fact, such statements call for revisiting the classical criticism of empiricism and positivism. As Kant famously wrote in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.” (Kant 1930, A51/B76) Hence, the ambition to refrain from forms of intuition, categories of understanding and ideas of reason, i.e. all the transcendental sources of knowledge, is very difficult to sustain in post-Kantian philosophy. And if the idea is to question the distinction between representation and essence *per se*, as it is often seen in pragmatism and post-structuralism, e.g. Dewey (see e.g., Dewey 1960, 40-41; here quoted from West 1989, 92) and Deleuze (see Deleuze 2008, 385-88; see also Sørensen 2019, ch. 5, sect. C), or maintaining what is sometimes called a flat ontology (see, e.g., Harman 2014, reviewed by Heaney 2015, sect. 1), then Marcuse becomes relevant again. As Marcuse argues, without an idea or a concept shaped by reason to become pure and non-empirical, i.e. without a speculative idea with a possible truth-content beyond the realm of sense perception or the world of representations, it is not possible to distinguish between truth and falseness, neither in sense perception nor in empirical investigations. In short,

without assuming a concept of what will be investigated prior to the investigation, the investigation becomes “circular and self-validating.” (Marcuse 1968, 116) Finally, if truth itself is called into question, Charles Taylor’s critique of Foucault is exemplary, firstly pointing out that expressing power relations in a critical tone does not make any sense if one does not admit the value of freedom, and, secondly, that the whole enterprise of unmasking power presupposes that there is a truth worth telling which has so far been masked (see Taylor 1984).

To sum up the problems, Jaeggi first presents the classical discussion of alienation as based on metaphysical claims about the nature of human and societal being, which she then questions, assuming the validity of poststructuralist and empiricist approaches. The consequence of downplaying the importance of history and economy is a universalization of alienation as a phenomenon that cannot be escaped in Modernity, and the critique therefore has no political implications beyond the liberal affirmation of freedom or autonomy as values beyond reach, the impossible others of alienation. As already mentioned, it is this almost classical critique of positivism that has brought me back to claim a realist metaphysics and to Marcuse and Marx, who I discuss in a forthcoming work already mentioned (see Sørensen 2020a). In the following, however, I will discuss Rosa’s critique of this final implication, i.e. that autonomy is the other of alienation, acknowledging some promising arguments of his but still criticizing him for accepting the post-metaphysical assumptions in contemporary intellectual discourses.

#### 4. Capitalism Generates Alienation

For Rosa, the basic problem with Jaeggi’s critique of alienation is the liberal connotations, i.e. that alienation mainly implies losing autonomy and self-determination (RE, 302). As Rosa argues, this is a rather narrow, or thin, and somehow misplaced understanding of alienation, especially, if I may add, when we consider the tradition from Diderot, Goethe, Hegel *et al* (see Sørensen 2020b; see also, e.g., Schmidt 1996). Against Jaeggi’s understanding of alienation, it can be adduced that being in love or committing oneself to parental obligations surely means losing freedom, control and thus autonomy, but, as Rosa emphasizes, that does not

necessarily lead to alienation (see RE, 302-03). As it has been noticed (see, e.g., Ekebjærg 2015, 18-19), being highly individualistic and psychologized, Jaeggi's conception of alienation is in general not very promising when it comes to understanding why modern capitalist society seems to be especially prone to produce alienation.

More promising is Rosa's analysis of alienation, which originally stems from a sociological analysis of the social acceleration experienced in modern capitalist society (see Rosa 2005, 483-85). This idea was developed further in *Alienation and Acceleration* from 2010, still stressing the societal aspects of alienation. Hence, it is argued that accelerating social life results in alienation in a number of different social relations, e.g. in relation to time and space, to things and activities, and ultimately to other human beings and oneself (see, e.g., Rosa 2010, 84-97). Furthermore, acknowledging the difficulties encountered by 20<sup>th</sup>-century Marxists in determining the "'true meaning' of 'alienation'", Rosa nevertheless reaffirms the classical claims of Marx himself. Alienation is therefore characteristic of not just any society or human relations, but in particular of late modern capitalist society and the fact that subjects in this particular societal formation are especially vulnerable to being alienated from "the subjective, the objective and the social worlds." (Rosa 2010, 83)

The social and societal approach to alienation is further developed in Rosa's most recent work, the impressive *Resonanz* from 2016, as also indicated by the subtitle, *A Sociology of World Relationship*, aiming to analyse both "constitutive and socio-historically contingent relations between subject and world" (RE, 144). Hence, capitalist growth society has an "inherent tendency" to stimulate pathologies of "anxiety and desire", the subject thus being, for "structural and systematic" reasons, terrified of being "left behind" (RE, 207). Confronted with what he considers a commonly experienced lack of clarity regarding the concept of alienation, Rosa finds it particularly important to stress two aspects of alienation that, in combination, mark a crucial difference between Jaeggi and himself. Moreover, both aspects allegedly reflect a more basic difference between the two approaches, namely their respective emphasis on the two sides of the relation between the self and the world.

Firstly, as mentioned, Rosa finds it important to analyse from what "a subject or a society" (RE, 300) is alienated, i.e. time, space, etc., focussing for this reason on the

world rather than the self. This is where Rosa recognizes the importance of the classical Marxist critique of capitalism for the discussion of alienation. Secondly, one must consider what can be regarded as a non-alienated relation between self and world, i.e. a way of living or working that can be considered somehow successful, a life that is good or “true” (RE, 300). In other words, if alienation is the challenge or the problem, what is the solution? For Rosa, the answer is resonance, and also in this case he stresses the importance of the relationship of the self to world rather than to itself. In contrast, Jaeggi can be said to focus more on the relationship of the self to itself, thus emphasizing autonomy and freedom of the self. I will return to the question of resonance as the other of alienation in the next subsection. In the remainder of this subsection, I will take a look at what Rosa retains from the tradition of social, socialist and sociological thought concerning alienation.

First of all, Rosa, in contrast to Jaeggi, recognizes the basic difference between, on the one hand, the existentialism and vitalism of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, where alienation is discussed in terms of “ontological or anthropological conditions of existence”, and, on the other hand, Marx, whom Rosa recognizes as the originator of the tradition to which he himself belongs, i.e. what he calls the “*Sociology of World Relationship*”. Marx is recognized as the first to derive the “quality of the world relations” (RE, 540) from the dominant social and societal conditions, analysing these conditions historically, sociologically and materially. Hence, alienation is the basic experience of human beings in capitalist society, i.e. a reaction to the “modernization processes” (RE, 540), and for Rosa this reaction determines an important line of thought in sociology. This enables him to reconstruct a history of social thought, i.e. social philosophy and sociological theory, as one long attempt to deal with the problem of alienation, the royal lineage thus being almost classical, namely Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Lukács and finally the Frankfurt School.<sup>5</sup>

In doing so, Rosa obviously follows Honneth in viewing Critical Theory as a kind of social philosophy that contrasts political philosophy, the former being mainly preoccupied with the question of social pathologies in modern capitalist society rather than questions of injustice and “justice.” (RE, 52; see also Honneth 2000, 27

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<sup>5</sup> For my account of the latter, see the interlude and ch. 7 in Sørensen 2019.

and the interlude in Sørensen 2019, sect. E.) Rosa acknowledges that capitalism is determined by the “private property of the means of production” (RE, 541), but just like Jaeggi, his focus regarding alienation is still on the damaging work and life processes under such a regime rather than the unjust distribution of property. Consequently, from the *Paris Manuscripts* over *The Communist Manifesto* to *The Capital*, Rosa emphasizes that Marx criticizes “pathologies”, “alienation” and “reification” (RE, 544-45), thus acknowledging the line of thought from the young Lukács, where the “extensive reification of the world relations” clearly surpasses “the economic theory of Marx” (RE, 548). Even though many would take reification to indicate commodification, i.e. problems related to private property and the commodity form (see, e.g., Homer 2018, 165-72), for Rosa, reification is related to alienation and the critique of instrumental rationality, rather than the critique of political economy.

As a consequence, Rosa considers himself part of a tradition from Lukács to Honneth, and as he rightly points out, confusion is prevalent in this tradition when it comes to the relationship between ‘alienation’ and ‘reification’. Sometimes they are used as synonyms, other times as complementary concepts, and they can even be understood as constituting an antagonistic relation. For Rosa, they are two aspects of the same pathology: reification concerns the perception of the world as only “resources, instruments and causality”, in short, as “things”, thus determining our treatment of the world, whereas alienation concerns the way “the subject [...] meets or experiences the world” (RE, 307). I will return to Rosa’s determination of alienation in the next section. The point here is that Lukács accepts Weber’s “diagnosis of modernity”, i.e. that the modern form of life is the result of a “comprehensive historical and cultural process of rationalization and bureaucratization”, and that this process of “legal and economic, cultural and political rationalization” can be traced back to the “protestant ethic” (RE, 548-49). In Rosa’s terms, the result of this process is an “extensive resonance-free form of world relationship” (RE, 550).

In contrast to Jaeggi, Rosa also recognizes Marcuse’s diagnosis claiming that alienation for the modern subject has become an “acceptable and comfortable second nature”, people having learned to cope with the “dialectics of resonance and

alienation” in a life where “art and criticism have lost their ability to challenge technical-capitalist reality”. Life in the one-dimensional society of totalized commodity exchange appears as the only possible existence, i.e. as the “natural order of the world”, and therefore alienation is simply not “perceived” (RE, 576-77). Hence, alienation and the good life are objective phenomena that cannot be reduced to the experiences of subjects, and it is therefore possible to conclude that alienation objectively dominates a certain form of society even though it goes unnoticed by the majority of the people, being thus subject to what Marcuse would call false consciousness (see, e.g., Marcuse 1968, 145).

As Rosa emphasizes, this diagnosis is radicalized by Adorno in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, where the “resonance catastrophe” becomes the “telos of the modernisation process” (RE, 578). I will return to this in the following section. The basic point, however, can already be outlined here. Even though Rosa does indeed stress the impact of the world on the self, precisely by categorizing all societal and historical realities under the term ‘world’ as universal and undifferentiated, the balance nevertheless shifts back to the experiences of the existential subject. In being represented by the term ‘world’, reality does not present itself to the self with essentially different logical or structural qualities according to its historical, societal or material characteristics.

Apparently, also in the case of Rosa, we find a terminology that has its roots in Heideggerian ontology rather than Marxist anthropology or social science (see, e.g., Heidegger 1986, ch. 3 (§§ 14-24)). Refusing to discuss the essential characteristics of different historical societies and of human beings, Rosa leaves the self to be confronted with a world constituted by a presumably overwhelming plurality of empirical phenomena. Moreover, to make sense of all this, Rosa only offers categories for those aspects of human reality that are not closely related to history, society, ethics or politics, i.e. arts, existential philosophy and religion. This move, however, brings us far away from the original Critical Theory that, as it is worth recalling, was conceived of by Horkheimer of as the intellectual aspect of the emancipatory struggle for overcoming capitalism (see Horkheimer 1988, 189; see also Sørensen 2019, 34-36).



## 5. Resonance is not the Good Life

Still, Rosa insists, modern capitalist society generates a relation to the world without resonance, making the world seem mute and deaf, and this is arguably what constitutes the alienation experienced in this kind of society, i.e. our society. Alienation means that the world has no more to say to us. Even though we have plenty of relations, they seem “unimportant, indifferent”, constituting what Jaeggi calls an “unrelated relationship” (RE, 305). Hence, for both Jaeggi and Rosa, alienation can be explained by the experience of indifference. For Rosa, however, it can become even more disturbing, namely as experiences of hostility and “repulsion” (RE, 306). Moreover, for him, the cause is clearly societal and possibly historical rather than a matter of universal social psychology or fundamental individual experiences.

Basically, resonance means for Rosa that motions of bodies relating to each other become harmonious, thus establishing various patterns of rhythmical oscillations, and as such, resonance is of the utmost importance in relation to acoustics and music (see RE, 282-84). Departing from this physical-physiological sense of resonance, Rosa emphasizes that it cannot be reduced experientially to a matter of feelings or emotions. It is a “relation mode” or a “specific form of being-related-to-the-world” (RE, 288-89) that employs Taylorian “strong evaluations” to navigate successfully in relation to our “cognitive and evaluative maps” (RE, 291). In order to live a non-alienating life, one needs to establish stable “axes of resonance” that render possible “resonance experiences”. Finally, as “constitutive resonance rooms for modern society”, Rosa singles out “nature, art and religion” (RE, 296), emphasizing that the successful relation between self and world implies supposedly meaningful answers rather than echoes (see RE, 298).

Based on this, Rosa argues that repression, suppression and heteronomy preclude the “free oscillations of the subject”. Alienating “fixations” prevent human beings from living in accordance with their “sexual orientation, religious orientation and aesthetic preferences”, autonomy being recognized, but only as an “important precondition for establishing resonant relations to the world” (RE, 313). Rosa refuses to accept Jaeggi’s idea of autonomy as “the central criterion for a successful, non-

alienated life”, since it arguably focuses too much on the “subject-side of the resonance thread”. In fact, rather than a solution to the problem of alienation, Rosa argues that the desire for autonomy is one of its causes, trying in vain to “bring under control and within reach still bigger parts of the world”. In contrast, resonance transcends self-determination and constitutes limitations of autonomy that “can be experienced” (RE, 314). As mentioned above, however, Jaeggi does not endorse this classical ideal of autonomy, and she may therefore be said to escape Rosa’s charges; however, if that is the case, I would say that it is unclear what autonomy really means.

In any case, being both anti-essentialists, they are both haunted by the unwillingness to commit to conceptual clarity. For Rosa, it is important to emphasize that the relation of resonance and alienation is not a simple and fixed binary opposition between two contraries. Instead, their interaction constitutes a “complex relation” (RE, 292). Resonance must not be confused with “consonance” or “harmony”, just as “dissonance” (RE, 316) does not necessarily imply alienation. Hence, resonance does not take place where everything is in “pure harmony”; on the contrary, it is rather the “sudden occurrence of the hope of being related and answered in a silent world” (RE, 321). Or: “Resonance is the (momentary) occurrence, the sudden illumination of a connection to a source of strong evaluations in a predominantly silent and often also repulsive world.” (RE, 317). Again, Rosa turns to music to explain his case, and that culminates in the following formulation:

At the root of the experiences of resonance lays the scream of the non-reconciled and the pain of the alienated. It has in its midst not the denial or sublimation of resistance, but the momentary, only glimpsed certainty of a sublimating ‘nevertheless’. (RE, 322)

For Rosa, one must therefore talk of a “dialectics of resonance and alienation” (RE, 322), although the dialectical relationship is clearly asymmetrical. Whereas alienation thus seems like a rather persistent challenge for the self in its relation to the modern world, resonance is something that happens only in passing, a moment of relief in the middle of a disaster, an exception, something evasive and exceptional. The persistence of alienation, however, is conditional in relation to personal development. Rosa consider alienation crucial for developing, in puberty, the

relationship between the self and the world. Puberty forms a necessary “phase” for the successful constitution of reflexive “resonance relations” (RE, 324). In this way, experiencing alienation is a necessary phase in the development into a mature person, but youth will of course eventually become something of the past.

Hence, both resonance and alienation are phenomena that happen in passing. Moreover, in contrast to Marx and Jaeggi, Rosa does not conceive of the basic relation between the self and the world as appropriation but as becoming a relative, i.e. as both sides becoming members of the same family. The point for Rosa is that one cannot permanently acquire the world as such as one’s own, but still it is possible to consider one-self and specific parts of the world as being intimately related. This must imply that for Rosa, as in the case of Foucault *et al.* – at least in the interpretation of Jaeggi mentioned above – the world in general is alienating and that is the reason why resonance can be said to presuppose its other; i.e. without negating something alien or alienating, resonance cannot occur. As Rosa remarks, resonance requires a “resonance sensibility”, and this special sensibility implies an “alienation sensibility” (RE, 319) and *vice versa*. Again, we can talk about a “dialectics of alienation and resonance” (RE, 325), i.e. we cannot have one without the other, but this time a displacement has brought us from sociology to biology or psychology.

Precisely because the world at large appears indifferent and sometimes even repulsive, one cannot, according to Rosa, obtain “enduring resonance” (RE, 318) or an “extensive feeling of wellbeing” (RE, 324), just as it is not possible to turn resonance into something operational that can be controlled and instrumentalized. Even if it was possible, it would result in an alienated and “ideological” (RE, 319) resonance. Instead, the “painful” experiences of alienation give rise to “artistic, philosophical and maybe even mystical” (RE, 324) ways of relating to the world, which is what resonance is about.

From the outset, Rosa’s ambition was to spell out the other of alienation through a philosophical idea of the “good life,” (Rosa 2010, 101) but somewhere along the way, this apparently became transformed into a “sociology of the good life” (RE, 14) that can make judgements about a “successful life” without “substantialist assumptions about the true essence of human nature” (RE, 36). Furthermore, in the process of this transformation, the good life ultimately seems to be reduced to merely

living a “successful life” (RE, 749), i.e. optimizing in an insecure world one’s individual “possibilities and chances” (RE, 45). Finally, even the optimization of life in this reduced sense is considered impossible as such, and the only ideal left is a never-ending sequence of exceptional and successful experiences.

The resulting idea of the good life thus differs substantially from the classical normative conceptions encountered in ethics and political philosophy. Rosa criticizes Jaeggi for her idea of the good life as autonomy, because it places too much weight on the subject side, but as far as I can see, this criticism misses the point. First of all, as already mentioned, Rosa does not get a hold on Jaeggi’s postmodern conception of autonomy, and secondly, the subject side may be said to play an even bigger role for Rosa when he emphasizes the singular experiences of an individual subject. Moreover, whereas Jaeggi’s ideal of autonomy could, in the best imaginable case, reflect the classical liberal ideal of a supra individual good life, Rosa does not offer any positive political or ethical ideal of the good life, only an aesthetic conception of fulfilling moments in a world that has been made alienating by capitalism. For Rosa, this is the best one can hope for in terms of a good life.

In relation to his predecessors in Critical Theory, Rosa claims that he is in line with both Habermas and Honneth, since they also aim at establishing resonance, even when they “use other concepts” (RE, 586). However, when resonance is determined aesthetically in the way Rosa does it, this is simply misleading, to say the least. Throughout their work, both Habermas and Honneth have retained a clear focus on social and political issues that cannot be reduced to a matter of aesthetics. Recognizing Marcuse’s argument about how the one-dimensional alienation of modern society is not even noticed, Rosa ultimately seems to be much closer to Adorno, who was indeed, as Rosa himself stresses, overwhelmed by the “socio-economic reality of modern world relations” and “the almost total reification catastrophe”. As Rosa emphasizes, Adorno did not believe in the possibilities of realizing the “successful life” that can be glimpsed in the moments of “aesthetical mimesis” (RE, 584-85), and that may ultimately also become the case for Rosa. The difference, though, might be that Rosa has so completely given up on the possibility of realizing the classical ideal of the good life that he is not bothered with the conceptual impossibility of its realization. For Rosa, there is simply no category

within which the utopian hope for the good life can be conceptualized; there are only exciting moments.

In this sense, Rosa represents an almost fatal and literally post-modern turn of Critical Theory. Compared to Jaeggi's hesitant post-modern liberalism, he appears more radical in his contestation of alienation, but the result is that alienation is conceived of as a massive and unconditional phenomenon in modern society, which makes the contestation ideological in the classical sense, i.e. upholding the legitimacy of accepting existing inequalities. With Rosa's understanding of the good life, the tiresome and boring political efforts of organizing the world collectively and democratically, and solving countless individual problems, becomes meaningless and futile. Freeriding becomes the norm. The best we can hope for is a long life constituted by a never-ending sequence of exciting and fulfilling moments in relation to art, nature and religion, not to speak of philosophy, and of course such moments are easier to come by when societal resources are ready at hand.

Following Rosa, we can criticize capitalism for not granting us enough of such harmonious moments of resonance, but as long as we ignore questions of justice and the possibility of realizing it through reasonable praxis, the classical normative idea of the good life will escape us. And it does not help that Rosa argues that "democratic politics" is an "instrument" to "becoming related to institutions", and that it will be an "answer relation". As he himself recognizes, rather than resonance, it is "the right to justification", or, as I would rather say, the attempt to realize social justice, that can constitute a "stop rule" for the specifically modern form of alienation, i.e. "reification" (RE, 588). Apparently, Rosa fails to recognize the hostility and violence generated by conflicting interest beyond matters of identity, i.e. the material inequalities constituting class struggles about power and property. He therefore fails to appreciate the importance of peaceful, or at least legitimate, mediation provided by law, rights and formal democratic procedures backed up by societal institutions based on political and legal power. Again, we are far away from 20<sup>th</sup>-century mainstream Critical Theory, this time the line of thought that lead Habermas from critique of ideology to endorsing constitutional democracy (see, e.g., Sørensen 2015a and 2020c).

## 6. Displacements in Contemporary Critical Theory

Rosa performs an aesthetic displacement of the critique of capitalism well known in the tradition of Critical Theory, and in doing so, he refers to classics such as Adorno and Marcuse. However, when it comes to the question of human nature or existence, i.e. whether we should employ a traditional metaphysical or dialectical vocabulary in this discussion, Rosa is still on par with Jaeggi, both of the two thus emphasizing strongly the experiential and phenomenological dimension of alienation. It may well be that Rosa, with his focus on the world rather than the self, and his emphasis on the role of capitalism, is more inclined to stress possible implications involved in the phenomenon of alienation as well as causal interactions between the world and the self.

Still, the overall framework is claimed to be empirical rather than metaphysical. To illustrate “late modern resonance relations”, Rosa refers to an empirical study of “personality traits”, showing how US college students today have much less “capacity and readiness for empathy” than before. The cause of this pathology is said to be the increased competitive orientation, the forced acceleration and the time spent looking at screens, i.e. the causal interaction of minds, capitalist ideology and new technology, all of them in combination implying less “eye contact” with “strangers” (RE, 311).

As Rosa puts it, the empirical and experiential approach is supposed to relieve the argument of such “speculative materialist or social philosophical presuppositions” (RE, 311) as can be found in classical characterizations of alienation, e.g. in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (see RE, 310-311 and 540-44). Like Jaeggi, Rosa thus emphasizes his own approach as being “non-essentialist” (RE, 312), meaning that he does not consider the idea of a “true human nature” useful to determine the “‘Other’ of alienation”, at least not when it is understood “as a substantially conceived concept” (RE, 301). In fact, he even declares himself sceptical with regard to “individualist and particularistic displacements”, be that in terms of “authenticity”, “inner core” or “real identity”. In general, he thinks it unlikely that there can be given reasons for accepting such ideas, just as it is unclear what kind of “normative authority” (RE, 301) they would have.

Like Jaeggi, Rosa wants to make a case against speculative metaphysics. Still, Jaeggi recognizes that a “diagnosis of alienation” must presuppose a “complex and thick picture of the person in its relations to the world”, and that it is “this philosophical-anthropological foundation of the concept of alienation that needs clarification at the conceptual level” (EN, 13). This is the reason why she offers her categorical analysis of the foundational concepts.

The same line of thought is expressed by Rosa in *Resonanz* (see RE, 301). Accordingly, he dedicates the first part out of four to a fundamental conceptual analysis, namely of “the basic elements of human relations to the world”, specifying our “being-placed-in-the-world” (RE, 5) through breathing, eating and drinking, walking, standing and sleeping, laughing, crying and loving. His ambition is to provide an “elementary analysis of the types and ways in which human beings relate to the world, how they experience and perceive it, act and orientate themselves in it”. As he argues, the most basic way to be put in the world is on one’s feet, and this he considers a matter of “ontological security” (RE, 83).

We already know that in Rosa’s account of human being, ethics, politics and law are conspicuously absent. But we may also ask in what way this ontological line of thought differs substantially from a classical metaphysical argument? Why is it less essentialist and speculative when Rosa talks about ‘basic elements of human relations to the world’ or ‘personality traits’ than talking about the specific aspects of ‘human nature’? Considering it crucial that the ‘capacity and readiness for empathy’ has declined must imply that a certain capacity and readiness for empathy is considered an essential trait for ideal human beings, i.e. part of human nature. In the same vein, one can ask about Jaeggi’s ‘foundational concepts’, thus questioning how both scholars may escape charges of being speculative and essentialist.

As I see it, this aspect of Jaeggi’s and Rosa’s arguments, i.e. their misgivings concerning genuine conceptual reflection and argument, reflects some crucial displacements of contemporary Critical Theory. First of all, we have Habermas’s introduction of communication as a supplement to, and eventually almost a replacement of, work as the primary human activity. In this way, alienation for Rosa means being confronted with distorted communication with the world rather than being deprived of oneself through work in the world. Secondly, Habermas has for

decades argued for a post-metaphysical transformation of the critical project. Accepting this agenda, Honneth, for instance, has transformed Hegel's conceptual reconstruction of the very idea of mutual recognition into an argument about communication mainly based on empirical inquiries within social and developmental psychology, and these displacements seem to be accepted by both Jaeggi and Rosa.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, this sequence of displacements becomes ideological, since it makes it difficult to argue normatively and thus critically regarding important subject matters. As Rosa himself often argues, a critical argument presupposes, at least implicitly, positive norms; the critique of alienation therefore presupposes an idea of non-alienation, i.e. the good life or at least some moments of good experiences (see, e.g., Rosa 2010, 9). However, such norms and ideas are very difficult to provide and justify beyond what is merely particular tastes, if only individual or singular particular experiences are allowed to count. Norms and ideas, by definition, transcend what is merely particular and empirical, and if this is granted, then we are on the way, or on the slippery slope, leading from words to universal concepts and, I would claim, ultimately to metaphysics, thus transcending any particular experience.

In fact, this seems to be what both react against. Jaeggi thus admits that the whole idea of "metaphysics" in contemporary discussions is often rather "diffuse". However, what she will not admit to are "ultimate values" from "transcendental sources" beyond the "world of representations" (EN, 50). Similarly, Rosa emphasizes that the non-essentialist character of the idea of resonance implies avoiding "concepts of identity and authenticity" (RE, 312), and this is important because such concepts typically pose as "normative authority" (RE, 301). Apparently, for both Jaeggi and Rosa, anti-essentialism is really about securing normative freedom, wanting to support conceptually the right of any individual to choose any particular lifestyle. To put it crudely, as a result, anti-essentialism may function as an integral element in the ideology of post-modern neo-liberalism. It substitutes philosophical anthropology with ontology and the demand for individual freedom, thus recognizing the unlimited plasticity of needs and desires and consequently

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<sup>6</sup> For my discussion of this displacement, see the interlude, sect. D. and E. in Sørensen 2019.



generating demands for ever-new commodities. Indeed, a sad fate for Critical Theory.

## 7. Conclusion: Reclaiming Metaphysics for Critique

Beyond this ideological role in relation to economy, the Critical Theory of Jaeggi and Rosa can also be accused of having some unfortunate political and legal implications. Their anti-essentialism thus seems to deny any transcendent normative authority, including law, by implication liberating human beings to do whatever they feel like. In addition, their approach sustains ideologically the metaphysical idea that reality will always be beyond our reach and that we must act as if behind a veil of ignorance, ultimately having nothing to trust but the invisible hand of the transcendent power *per se*, i.e. God himself. In fact, the classical Marxist critique of empiricist positivism as subjective idealism, such as it was conducted by the dialectical materialist Maurice Cornforth, still holds (see Cornforth 1950, xii-xiv, 20-27). Denying possible knowledge of reality, and insisting on merely having subjective experiences, can only imply relativism (see Cornforth 1950, 71-72).

When this line of thought is related to politics and education, the implication is a general *laissez faire* attitude, and such a consciousness must be criticized. Hence, instead of simply assuming an anti-essentialism that implicitly commits us to unsavoury ideas and ideals about human nature, society and politics, I think it is time to take the bull by the horns and once again endorse genuine conceptual speculation and metaphysics. Philosophy should once again be conducted as it has been since the beginning of time, blatantly speculative and normative in relation to both science and politics, claiming truth, justice and beauty for any possible human being. Since the overall goal of this critical inquiry is practical, i.e. educating citizens to democracy, in spite of, and overcoming, the damage inflicted on human being by capitalism. It is not enough simply to conduct a theoretical analysis of an empirical phenomenon.

In such a practical realist perspective, alienation is not a relation, not even an unrelated relation, as Jaeggi and Rosa understand it. Alienation is a real historical process, i.e. something that takes place in real societies, changing or developing real

human beings in their relations to other human beings and themselves. Alienation is not something static or dialectically vibrating. Rather, it is something dynamic and developmental, or, to leave out the reference to things altogether: alienation is not some *thing* at all; alienation happens, moves and develops in time and space, in particular under capitalism, affecting both itself and its subject, precisely failing to realize a preconfigured goal or anything ideal at all. Alienation is the state of being when heteronomously immersed in non-teleological change *par excellence*. Still, a change of this kind may unintentionally have some direction and unfortunately lead to growth of some kind, e.g. dismay or confusion, thus accentuating a state of mind or an order, or rather a disorder, characteristic of the unsuccessful relation between subject and object, self and other, (wo)man and world, or how one prefers to phrase it. Singling out this undesirable situation as indeed not desirable, by implication, alienation is worth criticizing, or escaping, and a non-alienating societal reality is worth fighting for and realizing historically.

Both Jaeggi and Rosa claim to consider Marx, Lukacs, Marcuse *et al.* in relation to alienation. However, due to their post-metaphysical approach, their interpretations of alienation in terms of autonomy and resonance leave much to be desired, both in themselves and especially in relation to the possibility of overcoming the alienation produced by capitalism, be that through revolution, reform or education.

As real human beings in a sometimes all too real world, we are affected by a dehumanizing societal system and want to change things for real. Through education, or politics, we want to influence people to become better human beings and citizens, and for this reason, we have to assume that our experiences do in fact stem from some kind of reality, that we can be in contact with this reality, and that we can direct our actions to realize something more real than the reality we know of. Therefore: What we want is metaphysical realism, not the relativism or subjectivism implied by empiricism, positivism and phenomenology.

Moreover, in Critical Theory we do not merely want to describe theoretically and critically experiences of societies and human beings as we already know them, nor do we simply want idealized singular moments of resonance. As Critical Theorists, we want people and societies to realize themselves beyond what can be experienced as real in our daily lives, and, as a consequence, we must trust not just conceptual

speculation, i.e. reason, but also phantasy and imagination; in fact, it can be argued that being utopian is simply being reasonable (see, e.g., Feenberg 2018).

This is why I will ultimately argue for reviving the subject philosophy, philosophy of consciousness and realist metaphysics, engaging positively with classical Critical Theory, Hegel and Marx. Of course, this does not mean that I want to profess one ultimate metaphysical truth; what I want is to re-establish the legitimacy of having the ambition of getting to the truth of the matter. An empirical or phenomenological diagnosis can all too easily deteriorate to positivist mystification, paralyzing percipients when it comes to thinking in terms of practical solutions to real, substantial problems regarding human societal life. As I have argued elsewhere (see, e.g., Sørensen 2010, 135, 323-24), instead of a self-consciously modest phenomenalism, empiricism or positivism, our relation to the world should be understood through reflective metaphysical realism.

Reality being constantly in change, we could talk about developmental realism. Moreover, as Marcuse stresses, philosophy should not leave everything as it is (see Marcuse 1968, 173); on the contrary, philosophy should contribute to realizing a reality worth living in for human beings. In this practical perspective, truth and rightness must not be restricted to what it has been possible to experience so far; consequently, in a certain sense we are talking about transcendental issues. Acknowledging such a realm of possibly valid ideas as part of reality or, even, reality as such, has traditionally implied entering into speculative metaphysics. However, as critical philosophers, this is something we should welcome and be proud of.

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