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Who is ill when a society is ill?

0. Introduction

The past few decades have seen the rehabilitation of the concept of social pathology in critical social theory. After all, what is the purpose of critical theory if not diagnosing the sicknesses of contemporary society? However, it is still very much unclear how to understand the concept of social pathology. Who is really ill when a society is ill? Are some members of the society sick, or perhaps a large proportion of the population? Or is it groups, institutions, or the society as a whole who have fallen sick? What would it even mean for these entities to be in a pathological state?

This chapter analyses the ontological commitments of different conceptions of social pathology. Following Laitinen and Särkelä, I work through four accounts of social pathology which are divided into two camps. The “thin sense” of social pathology offers a more atomistic view, which focuses on the socially caused and pervasive suffering of individuals. The “thick sense” of social pathology takes more literally the medical sense of the word pathology and aims to apply it to societies as a whole. The aim of this chapter is thus to give a short overlook of the various senses of social pathology present in contemporary critical social theory (section 2), and to give an analysis of the social-ontological commitments that the different conceptions of social pathology hold (sections 3 and 4). Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the central claims of this chapter is that the social-ontological commitments between different accounts of social pathology are different. The disclosure of the ontological commitments of the conceptions of social pathology is the main task of the chapter, but it is done in order to highlight what difference, if any, these commitments make in relation to the critical potential of a social theory. My hypothesis is that the stronger the ontological commitments to functional or structural wholes are, the easier it is to evaluate social orders on the basis of the concept of social pathology. However, this comes at a cost: stronger social-ontological commitments will require stronger philosophical defenses that are not readily available, or easy to accept. With this in mind, the chapter finishes with a short outline of a critical social ontology as an attempt to make sense of social pathologies and with the general aim of grounding the norms of social critique (section

5).¹ However, before all that, I will start with a brief overview of the general idea of the concept of social pathology in critical social philosophy.

1. Social pathologies, critical theory, and emancipation

If one were to look for the general goal of critical theory, one would most probably come up with the goal of emancipation (see, e.g., Honneth, 2017). The preferred method in achieving, or at least getting closer to, emancipation is not that of giving a definition of it through necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead, critical theory often aims to give an analysis of those conditions that work against emancipation. This, quite obviously, requires some understanding of what emancipation entails, but this is commonly spelled out in terms of a historically developed understanding of emancipation – not metaphysical conditions of it. In short, at the center are the internal or *immanent* potentials for emancipation that are inherent in the current way of life of the society in question. While any essentialist, or metaphysical strictly defined utopia is rejected, critical social theory often points beyond the current social order. A key role in this process is the conceptualization and diagnosis of those contemporary conditions that work against emancipation, as it is understood in any particular historical situation.

But considering the pluralist nature of contemporary societies, how is it possible to identify even “immanent” senses of emancipation? One strategy would be to identify as broad and agreeable a ground as possible. This is what, for example, Axel Honneth’s (2014a) work on freedom as the core modern value can be understood to do. His critical theory has focused on analyzing the conditions that obstruct freedom from being realized – be it certain institutional settings, work conditions, or individual dispositions to misunderstand the conditions of their personal individual freedom.²

It is within this circle of critical theorization that the concept of social pathology finds its most prominent use. The critical diagnosis of a society can be said to point out the illnesses of the society and, when possible, it tries to provide cures for these illnesses. Institutional dysfunctions and social suffering are sicknesses that stay in the way of freedom and emancipation, and it is the task of

¹ A much shorter version of these same ideas has been published in conference proceedings as Hirvonen, 2019b. This paper presents an updated and more detailed argument for the same view.

² Laitinen et al. (2015: 11) identify authors from Hegel to Durkheim and Adorno to use the pathology-diagnosis type of social analysis. It could be stated that the concept of social pathology has found most purchase in the Hegel and Marx inspired critical social theory.

critical social theory to pinpoint and eradicate these, mostly by giving conceptual tools for social agents.

But what is the point of bringing in the medical term “pathology” if the real interest lies in the social emancipation? Furthermore, even if the pathologies of the social do exist, is the analysis of them all that critical social theory is good for? In the medical context, the concept of pathology also assumes, as a counterpart to pathological states, normal states and reproductive biological wholes. According to Georg Henrik von Wright’s analysis of medical “goodness”, the talk of medical goodness of an organ or a faculty presupposes “the existence of an essential connexion between the kind (of organ or faculty) and some *function*. [...] An organ which performs its proper function well is said to be good or well” (von Wright, 1963: 52, 54.) However, to give strong substantial definitions of normal states of a society is dangerously close to submitting to anti-historical essentialism or ossification of the current institutional setting. Is it even possible to find a normal state of a society? In his influential analysis of the concept of pathology, Georges Canguilhem (1991: 256) warns against any easy extensions of it into the social realm:

it is enough that one individual in any society question the needs and norms of this society and challenge them - a sign that these needs and norms are not those of the whole society - in order for us to understand to what extent social need is not immanent, to what extent the social norm is not internal, and finally, to what extent the society, seat of restrained dissent or latent antagonisms, is far from setting itself up as a whole.

On the other hand, failing to give any critical standards for evaluation of society, one is close to equally un-appealing strong value relativism. There are of course many ways to thread this (not-so-thin) line between essentialism and relativism, as well as there are multiple conceptualizations of the meaning and role of social pathology within critical social theory. Much of this depends on how one sees the basic building blocks of society, and, accordingly, of social theory, to be arranged. In the next section, four distinct accounts of social pathology are introduced – each of them offering distinct accounts of the basic structure of a society.

2. Four Conceptions of Social Pathology

Even the medical sense of the concept of pathology is notoriously difficult to pinpoint precisely (see, e. g. Canguilhem, 1991). It is often taken to mean a dysfunctional biological system or a body whose continued functioning or even existence is threatened because of the dysfunctional state. This being the case, it is no wonder that the concept of pathology has also found use in the sphere of social

analysis. Seeing society as a functional body, prone to illnesses and other malaises, is an idea that is as old as western philosophy itself. Plato's *Republic* gives such a description; from that point onwards the idea has come up from routinely in philosophy, social theory, political practice, and fiction (Honneth, 2014b: 683–684).

Despite the difficulties in giving an exact definition of a pathology, the key conceptual pair of the corresponding states of “normal” and “pathological” are present in many accounts (see Canguilhem, 1991: 35, 41; von Wright, 1964: 61). In an ideal case, a medical doctor is able to diagnose an illness and propose the needed measures to get back into a healthy state. Similarly, a social theorist would be able to spot the illnesses of a society and suggest those measures (for example, right kinds of policies) that would enable the society to get back to normal. However, despite the general shared features of medical and social theories, it is unclear how strong the analogy is and what it commits us to. Here a helpful starting point is a recent analysis by Arto Laitinen and Arvi Särkelä (2019) who lay down four main conceptions of social pathologies that are present in contemporary critical social theory. It is suggested that these conceptions come in two main camps: A) thin (or normativist) and B) thick (or naturalist). Whereas the thin sense of pathology takes the term to be only metaphorical, the thick sense claims that the state–body analogy should be taken quite literally. Both camps include different theoretical iterations, and the analysis below (A.1, A.2 and B.1, B.2) follows loosely the conceptions outlined by Laitinen and Särkelä.

A) The thin sense of social pathology

A.1 Pathology as a deviation from social norms. The thin senses of pathology are called thin because they are mostly metaphorical in their use of the concept of pathology. In the most general and abstract formulation, a “normal state” means that there are certain social norms that are followed and, correspondingly, the pathological or “unnormal” is a deviation from these norms.

Examples of this sense of social pathology include, for example, conservative claims in the marriage equality discussions where one of the arguments is that if certain norms are not followed (e.g. that marriage is meant to be between men and women only) then the moral core of society itself crumbles. In short, the conservative argument is that there are certain normative orders that need to be followed as they are held to constitute the society as it is.

The deviation from social norms model of social pathologies is not necessarily conservative in the above sense. However, it does face the challenge of spelling out the core norms of a society. What

are those norms that define normal and pathological? It is clear that for any critical or revolutionary thinkers, holding the current normative order as definitive “normal” is unacceptable. John Dewey (1973: 51-53) goes as far as saying that in fact this sort of conservative project of retaining the singular normative core of institutions is in fact futile. Institutions and normative orders are products of their time and as circumstances change, their norms and practices are not as applicable anymore. In short, the “normal” of the normativist account might a historically changing and contested.

Furthermore, there is a need to distinguish between accidental individualistic deviations from the more reoccurring and systematic deviations. A single deed against, or beyond, the prevailing norms does not seem to constitute a social pathology as such. The norm-centered sense of pathology presents a dangerous totalitarian potential – although this is by no means necessarily entailed by the view – that individuals, or their individual actions, are judged as sicknesses. Although this sense of social pathology retains the key sense of something connected to normality and normativity, something needs to be added for it to capture the functional or systematic nature of social pathologies.

A.2 Pathology as a deviation from social norms, with a common structure. While the A.1 faces the challenge of qualifying the central norms and distinguishing individual deviations from actual social cases of pathology, according to the A.2 sense of a social pathology, there is a common structure that designates certain behaviours, dispositions, and tendencies as socially pathological. In one sense, this could help to demarcate social pathologies other accidental deviations from norms, but at the same time this conception might be too limited.

Christopher Zurn’s (2011) account of social pathologies of recognition as second-order disorders is perhaps the most well-known account to adopt this approach. According to him (or his reading of Axel Honneth’s work) social pathologies are pervasive, socially caused, cases of lack of a reflexive second-order understanding of social life. Multiple issues such as ideological recognition, maldistribution, invisibilisation, distortions of rationality, reification, and problems in institutionalised self-realisation all are based on a similar disconnect between our experiences and our second-order understanding of them and of how we relate to others (Zurn, 2011: 345).

Arguably, and similarly to the deviation from social norms conception (A.1), Zurn’s account leaves behind medical or organic connotations of the concept of social pathology (Laitinen et al., 2015: 11). This, in itself, is not philosophically suspect (as far as one is happy to accept a metaphorical sense of social pathology). Nevertheless, the “the common structure” models have a deeper problem: it is unlikely that they capture all the relevant phenomena we want to designate social pathologies.

For example, as Laitinen (2015) points out there might be obstructions to social recognition that are not necessarily related to issues with second-order capabilities. If Zurn's model is meant to capture all the forms of possible deviations from social norms, it should be able to explain why some interesting cases should not be counted as pathologies. In other words, if there is only one form of social pathology, it seems that we are potentially overlooking multiple other forms of social suffering.

In response, Zurn could claim that he is merely describing pathologies of *recognition* but that it is entirely possible that there are also other social pathologies. In any case, it is highly doubtful that there is only one structure of pervasive social suffering, and thus limiting the concept of social pathology to merely one kind of pervasive social suffering seems like an unnecessary limitation of the concept. It seems that any “common structure” model will suffer from the same problem, unless the structure is formulated in such an abstract and broad fashion that we are back at the even thinner A.1 conception of pathology.

B) The thick sense of social pathology

B.1 Pathology as an illness of society. The thicker senses of social pathology take the medical connotations of pathology more seriously. If we understand society as an organism or a body, it becomes easier to think of that social organism as ill. This is not completely outlandish thought as, in fact, from Plato onwards it has been part of philosophical practice to describe society as a more or less unified body (Honneth, 2014b: 683–684). The thick sense of social pathology takes this comparison quite literally: a society is a whole with reproductive goals and its own social organs. As Canguilhem states, social organization, and the creation of institutional worlds, is “above all, the invention of organs” (Canguilhem, 1991: 253). In a strong parallel to medical pathologies, social pathologies are dysfunctions of the social organs or, in other words, social organs failing to contribute to the continued reproduction of the society.

A view of this kind has been recently supported by Honneth (2014b) who argues that any serious use of the term pathology would require rehabilitation of the concept of social organism. However, the organicist view of societies has been challenged on multiple fronts. Firstly, the socio-ontological background assumptions (more of these in the next section) remain questionable as it is unclear in what sense a society is a whole with its own goals (Laitinen et al., 2015: 13). Secondly, the organicist model can be claimed to be both conservative and morally irrelevant: placing social reproduction at the epicenter of social diagnosis merely preserves the current social order, and if social reproduction overrides individuals’ rights or their suffering, the moral worth of the theory that forgets individuals

is questionable at best. In other words, the well-being of individuals is subordinate to the collective reproduction of a functional social whole. Any strong defense of organicist theory would thus need to connect the problems of the social whole to the idea of individuals' social suffering.

B.2 Pathology as a disturbance in the process of social life. The processual model of social life and social pathologies (presented, for example, by Laitinen et al., 2015: 13; Laitinen & Särkelä, 2019) aims to avoid falling into a static picture of a healthy society (B.1) by arguing for a dynamic conception of social life. Within this picture, the society is still understood as a functional whole. However, this “whole” is a process, which can develop and evolve and, thus, the focus is shifted from static reproduction into the processual development of the society. As the name suggests, in this account the disturbances of the developing process of social life constitute social pathologies. These could be, for example, hindrances to public sphere that block new ideas and institutions from being developed. According to Särkelä (2017), this view can be found from both Hegel and Dewey.

Although this model avoids the conservative tendencies of searching for a static normal state, focusing on development does not yet guarantee that enabling social change and social progress will necessarily lead to a better society. Thus, the processual model of social pathology will also need a supporting theory of social suffering of individuals that is then anchored in social theory in order to give it the required normative weight.

The following analysis will not strictly argue for any particular conception of social pathology. Instead, the aim is to highlight the various socio-ontological commitments that are needed in order to defend any of the positions introduced above. The analysis also aims to unveil the ontological commitments that would best enable the serious use of the concept of social pathology in critical social theory. Namely, the commitments that enable non-conservatism and have an explanatory connection to social suffering and social structures. The claim in the following sections is that these can in fact be achieved with various socio-ontological commitments about the basic structure of a society.

3. Social-ontological toolbox

What is meant by the examination of socio-ontological commitments here is the attempt to find out the units and agents that are at the so-called fundamental level of the theory in question.³ To illustrate, an example can be drawn from the classic social theories of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Weber famously holds to methodological individualism where all social actions can be ultimately analyzed as individuals' actions (Weber, 1971: 77-78). Durkheim, on the other hand, claims that social facts are things that are largely independent of the particular individuals who manifest them (Durkheim, 1968: 45). While Weber aims to assume nothing more than individual agents and their interactions, Durkheim has to include social facts into his ontology as separate entities. It is these kinds of commitments and their possible relation to the possibilities of critique that we are after in this section.

However, to begin an analysis of social-ontological commitments, it is useful to distinguish between different social-ontological questions. Philip Pettit and David Schweikard's influential tripartite division of different debates in social ontology is most helpful for this task. These are atomism-holism debate, individualism-collectivism debate, and singularism-nonsingularism debate. According to Pettit and Schweikard (2006: 35; see also Pettit, 1996: 138), the first debate focuses on the constitution of social agents. Holists argue that agents are necessarily dependent on others (and their relations to others) whereas, in what resembles extreme libertarian thought, atomists state that is no such dependence. The individualism-collectivism debate concerns the relationships between agents and social structures (Pettit & Schweikard, 2006: 35; Pettit, 1996: 111). Individualists defend the position that social structures do not compromise individual intentionality and free will – even though they might have a role in the constitution of the individual psychology. According to collectivism, individual psychology is in fact predetermined by social (or structural) regularities. The final debate, between singularism and nonsingularism, pertains to the possible existence of collective agents (Pettit & Schweikard, 2006: 36). The singularist position is that only individual human beings can be agents or persons, whereas nonsingularism accepts that there can be collective agents or group agents as well.

These three issues are logically separate and giving an answer to one question does not commit one to any answer in relation to another question. Weberian methodological individualists can easily be

³ Even if one does not want to commit to ontology as a project that maps out how things *actually* are, it does not make ontological mapping futile. Instead, ontology can be understood as a conceptual enterprise. Ota Weinberger takes this stance when he describes "ontology not as a description of entities and their relationships as facts, but as a matter of stipulation: ontology provides a framework theory for the development of different fields of knowledge by formulating their basic concepts. [...] Our knowledge and impressions of objects and the relations among them is human knowledge, and explanation is a product of human thought within the pragmatic realm of human existence, but the categories and the framework of our knowledge and of our thinking are based on stipulation" (Weinberger, 1985: 309). Nevertheless, an ontology still needs to provide an effective orientation for our practices and for our experiences.

either an atomist or a holist. The same goes for those Durkheimians who would emphasize structures in their explanations of the social world. Furthermore, there is not only one kind of atomism, holism, individualism, and so forth, but rather different iterations of the broader positions that might vary greatly in detail.

The social-ontological distinctions give a conceptual toolbox that helps to answer the question of “who is ill when a society is ill?”. The analysis below aims to clarify what kinds of entities make up the social world and in what sense they might be ill. The potential answers differ from account to another. In some accounts the relevant entities are singular individual human beings, whereas others commit also to larger wholes like social structures or collective agents. The atomism-holism issue is largely ignored in the analysis as the interest is mainly on the status of social structures and the status of the possible supraindividual collective agents. Thus, although all three debates are cornerstones of social ontology, not all of them are equally relevant to the current discussion.

4. An analysis of ontological commitments

What are the necessary elements needed for different conceptions of social pathology? In this section we see that the thin conceptions can get by with a rudimentary commitment to there being social norms whereas the thicker conceptions need also supporting ontological commitments.

A.1 Pathology as a deviation from social norms. When a social pathology is constructed as a persisting deviation from social norms, there is no need to assume that there exists a separate society or a social entity that would be ill in itself. In the most minimal sense, what is needed for this sense of pathology is a normative framework and social agents. While this sense of pathology does not assume that society is an entity over and above individual agents themselves, some sort of explanation of the ontological status of the normative framework ought to be given.

There are a variety of theories of social norms, but here the idea is merely to outline the minimal conditions that ought to obtain for there to be any social norms. Wolfgang Detel argues that the most basic notion of social norms requires that there are agents with minds and sanctioned regularities of behavior: “*A basic social norm enforced in a community or a collective S* is a practice enforced in S which is handed down to members of S by correcting behaviour by using positive or negative sanctions” (Detel, 2008: 476). This basic notion is open to various historical accounts of how and why any particular norms arise and how and why they are upheld.

Detel's notion gives an individualistic – although admittedly also interactionist – interpretation of social norms. Norms consist of controlling or guiding individual behavior in relation to other individuals. The normative system, as a whole, can be understood as an aggregation of individuals' controlled/guided behaviour and attitudes. Thus, the normative system does not have any ontological status over and above the collection of individual behaviours and attitudes. If the attitudes change, the framework will change too. But this is not because there is a causal connection between the two. They change at the same time because the normative framework *is* the aggregation of individual attitudes and behaviors.

As noted in the above section, the individualism does not mean a commitment to atomism about norms.⁴ In fact, norms could be considered as a holistic result of the actions and attitudes of multiple individuals. The normative framework emerges from the interaction of individuals, but it does not exist mysteriously over and above them. The normative framework does not override or dominate individuals, but it is also clear that no single individual could create or determine a normative framework either.

This individualist-interactionist account can be combined with Weinberger's insights about the existence of normative institutions. Norms have to be expressible in suitable language but they do not need to be explicitly expressed. However, as Weinberger states:

The real existence of normative regulative systems is based on their institutionalization. Norms are real in so far as they determine behavior. They are connected with institutions and institutionalized in society in people's minds, in the existing social organizations, and in the working of social institutions. So-called institutional facts - as opposed to brute facts - can be understood only through their normative characterization, which forms their core (Weinberger, 1985: 322).

While institutionalization of the social patterns of behavior might be taken as the core of normative frameworks, this core, according to individualist-interactionist accounts, can be stated solely in terms of the interconnected actions of individuals. The society is not in any literal sense sick in itself, "as a society". Instead, illnesses of societies are constituted of practices that deviate from its social norms. This sort of account is ontologically parsimonious but the downside of the bare bones normativist account of social pathologies is that it does not offer many tools to go beyond the current normative order. The sense of pathology as a deviation from the norms is clear, but the normative orders

⁴ Furthermore, although this view might be holistic regarding norms, it does not need to be holistic regarding the agents that constitute the norms.

themselves are left beyond questioning. It is also difficult to see how a normative order itself could be pathological. Although this does not mean that it could not be done. For example, perhaps we have some core norms behind the institutions, which can be defined in a way that goes beyond mere social regularities.⁵

A.2 Pathology as a deviation from social norms, with a common structure. The above analysis for the A.1 cases also holds largely for the account of social pathologies as normative deviations with a common structure. There is obviously the added element of having a common structure, but this is not a structure in the sense of a Durkheimian social structure but instead a shared form of deviation from the normative framework that individuals as individuals share. For example, in Zurn's account, social pathologies are defined as "constitutive disconnects between first-order contents and second-order reflexive comprehension of those contents, where those disconnects are pervasive and socially caused" (Zurn, 2011: 345-346). In practice, this means that our understanding of the various reasons for our social behavior is somehow veiled. For example, ideological consciousnesses do not have a second order understanding of the way in which ideology distorts their first order beliefs (Zurn, 2011: 348). Zurn identifies similar structures at play with maldistribution, invisibilization, disorders of modern rationality, reification, and paradoxes of individualization.

These deviations are "possessed" by the individuals as they pertain to individuals' reflexive abilities. However, there can be more variation in the social-ontological accounts of the causes of the pathologies. Structuralist-collectivist social theories could aim to explain the causes of the pathologies by referring to independent or "supraindividual" social structures and regularities. Methodological individualists could, respectively, try to find the causes of the social pathologies from individuals' social attitudes and behaviour. In this sense, although the pathologies are ultimately realized at the level of an individual agent, the notion of social pathology as a deviation from social norms with a shared structure can draw from individualist, collectivist, singularist, and nonsingularist resources. The common structure account is neutral with regard to these questions and it does not strictly require pre-conceived social-ontological commitments. However, this makes it clear that the defenders of this account should take care to make it clear which commitments they actually do hold.

⁵ Honneth's (1995) idea of recognition providing philosophical-anthropological normative grammar for social conflicts that goes deeper than surface-level normative orders could be thought of as giving a theory of a more fundamental normative grounding.

B.1 Pathology as an illness of society. While the thin senses of social pathology (A.1 and A.2) are possible with individualistic ontology – although they do not necessarily require a commitment to it –, taking the medical connotations of the illness of society seriously requires a change of the view on what really exists. In other words, it requires society to be seen as a singular entity. This could be a living organism or – perhaps in more neutral terms – a functional whole (that is not reducible to its individual members and their interactions).

Although thinking of a state or a society as a living organism might sound outlandish, the thought as such is not new: Plato’s city-state was modelled after the idea of a soul (Szanto, 2015: 296), while the likes of Hobbes and Rousseau argued that the social contract constitutes a new person (see Hirvonen, 2017). But how literally should we take this analogy? What sense does it make to say that a society as a body is in some sense ill? And further, what socio-ontological commitments does the idea of a society as a functional whole entail?

There are (at least) two possible ways to understand the society that is the alleged target of an illness: 1) as a structure or 2) as an agential entity or, simply, as an agent. With the structural view of society, the pathological element is seen as the dysfunctional social structures. But what exactly are these structures and what is their relationship to agents? Are structures some sort of social facts, institutions, or mechanisms, and can these in some senses dominate individuals? These kinds of questions are directly related to the individualism-collectivism question. In principle, individualistic explanations of social structures are available. They could be understood as institutionalized normative frameworks, patterns of individual sanctioned behaviour, and habits. However, with this move the special nature of society being ill as a society is reduced back to the thin conception of social pathologies where the illnesses are described as violations of norms (or that the norms of interaction were in some manner systematically violated in current practices). Collectivist and non-metaphorical accounts, in turn, give structures a more independent and central role. For example, in Michael Thompson’s account, social(-economical) structures come to dominate even the conceptual understanding of individuals. According to him, “there is an essential *primacy of functional forces of social organization to those of consciousness*” (Thompson, 2016: 92, original italics). Here social pathology can be seen either as some structural feature that is connected to the inability to realize individual freedom and emancipation, or as a dysfunctional structure in the sense that it undermines its own continued existence. In both cases the social structure has an independent dominating role in relation to individuals.

One worry with structural accounts of pathologies is that it is hard to see where the critical potential can be introduced into the picture, because individuals are literally at the mercy of social structures and the formative processes within these structures. In short, the collectivist position takes away room from individual agency and this – while being a defensible philosophical position – goes strongly against the emancipatory goals of critical social theory. Secondly, the analogy of social pathology and individuals' illnesses is stretched as although social structures can be understood as functional wholes, it is unclear how much they have in common with living biological agents.

The second option was to consider society as a collective agent. Although this might sound metaphysically extravagant, the history of philosophy is ripe with examples of group agency and group personification,⁶ even at the state level. To return to the great philosophers mentioned above, Hobbes (2000: 75) states that “inanimate objects, as a church, a hospital, a bridge, may be personated by a rector, master, or overseer”. Rousseau, on the other hand, takes the personification and group agency to apply at the state level. For him it was self-evident that in making a social contract, individuals also constitute a new collective person:

Instantly, in place of the particular person of each contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body made up of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from this same act its unity, its common self, its life, and its will. This public person thus formed by the union of all the others formerly took the name city (Rousseau, 2012: 173).

Similarly, in Hegel – who in turn has had a major influence on critical social theory – we find the claim that the social order in itself is a self-determining and self-reproducing rational entity (see Neuhouser, 2000: 121).

If society is understood as an agent (or a person), the analogy with individual agents becomes stronger. Furthermore, the collective agent accounts avoid some of the problems that collectivistic structuralism faces. Namely, nonsingularism and individualism are compatible accounts (see, for example, List & Pettit, 2011) and thus understanding societies as nonsingular group agents would enable social theorists to hold on to the individual freedom while supporting the existence of a collective entity (i.e. the society as a group agent) that could have its own pathologies. However, one challenge is that the contemporary defenses of group agency tend to focus on corporate-like entities

⁶ Here one might note a terminological shift. While first there has been talk of mere agency, here groups are already taken to be persons in themselves. It is clear that agency and personhood are not completely equivalent concepts but at the same time, those defending group personhood are making even stronger claims than those defending group agency (see, for example, Rovane, 1998; List & Pettit, 2011). Only agents can be persons, and personhood can be taken as a subcategory of the broader notion of agency.

which are smaller than states or societies.⁷ Thus, even if the idea of robust group agency is philosophically sound, it might not apply at the level of the whole society. Accounts that require something like shared intentions or mutual understanding of everyone's roles in the collective enterprise are hardly suitable for large-scale entities with various internal groups and multitudes of non-organized individuals, who have no connection to each other or knowledge of each other. While theories of group agency might apply to governments and parliaments, it is much more questionable if they can be extended to citizens and the society as a whole. Rephrasing Canguilhem's (1991: 256) warning, even one person shouting "Not in my name!" seems to be enough for the social whole to collapse. Or if this sounds too strong, one could imagine societies with many competing groups that might not share any strong sense of a greater whole that they would be part of.

In short, arguments that defend full-blown group agency at corporate level may not extend well to the societal level. Perhaps seeing society as a more or less functional whole with certain goals might be enough, but if the conditions of "agency" are loosened, then the analogy to individual pathologies might not hold up that well anymore. Then again, perhaps the analogy does not need to be strong. An irreducible social whole with its own goals and own functions might give an intelligible enough sense of social pathologies – dysfunctions of that particular whole. However, any theory relying on this kind of idea of a functional whole should also explain how the whole is related to the individual members of the society. After all, why should Canguilhem's dissident care about the well-being of the whole if she does not see herself as being part of its functionality (or benefiting from its functions). In other words, from the perspective of critical social theory, organicist models of society need to connect the social dysfunctionality to the (social) suffering of the individuals.

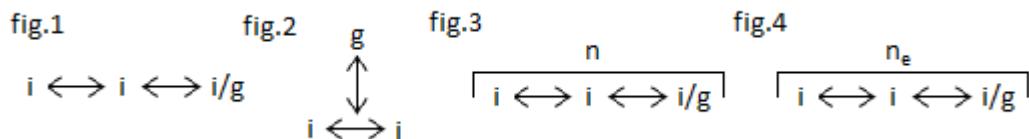
B.2 Pathology as a disturbance in the process of social life. As argued above, the organicist model (B.1), in its structural interpretation, presents a static picture of a society, assuming that the structural functional features that are necessary for a society's reproduction are defined and already known. The processual account adds to this picture a dynamic and developing element. However, this addition comes with its own challenges. Namely, we could easily attribute all kinds of self-defined changing and evolving aims to a collective agent, it is not clear that this can be done with non-agential social structures. However, in the processual picture, the aim is to avoid a static view of a society by doing precisely that: by attributing some of the evolving features to the structural levels of the society as

⁷ For a short summary of the contemporary discussion on group personhood, see Hirvonen 2017.

well. This sets the processual view into the middle ground between the society-as-an-agent and the society-as-a-static-structure theories.

The ontological standing of the structures can be understood similarly with (B.1), but unlike in the static picture of the structures having a certain function, the structures are changing and evolving in their healthy state. Saying that structures are processual does not then bring in any new ontological commitments, but it qualifies the nature of the healthy/ill structures.

The figures below illustrate the ontological frameworks that have been analyzed above.



In the first figure, there are only interrelated individual agents (i) and group agents (g). The second figure places groups (g) above the individual agents (i). The third figure shows interrelated individuals (i) and groups (g) within a normative framework (n). The fourth and final figure has individual (i) and group agents (g), but the normative framework (n_e) has been qualified differently.

In the case of the thin conceptions of social pathology (A.1 and A.2), the basic structure of society does not necessarily need anything else than interrelated agents (fig.1). Though these conceptions need some account of normativity, this too can be understood as merely sanctioned regular patterns of interaction. The common structure sense of social pathology (A.2) does make a further claim that there is a certain shared deviation from the interrelations (\leftrightarrow) that constitutes a pathology. In principle, both conceptions are open to the idea of collective agents. However, as Pettit and Schweikard (2006) have argued, the existence of such nonsingular agents is an independent philosophical issue. Even if group agents would exist, they would be, so to speak, on the same level with the individual agents. Pathologies could still be understood as located in the interactions between agents and in the agents' relations to the norms of interaction.

The thicker conceptions of pathology have more complex social-ontological commitments. In the organicist view of social pathology (B.1), we can understand the society either as a group agent (g) that is ill (fig.2), or as a normative framework (n) – a non-reducible functional whole – (fig.3) that is ill (or dysfunctional). The first version makes a slight deviation from the nonsingularistic versions of

A.1 and A.2 in that the group agent exists in a vertical relation, over and above the individuals (or that the individuals are subsumed within a group agent as members of it). In the thinner senses of pathology, group agents are agents on the same horizontal level of interrelations. If we see society as a normative framework (n), or non-agential structure instead of an agent, then we can understand social pathologies literally as dysfunctions of that framework or structure. These dysfunctions can be relatively independent from the individual or group agents that fall under its sway. B.1 and B.2 differ in their characterizations of the normative framework. The organicist conception (B.1) has a static picture of the framework, whereas the processual conception (B.2; fig.4) sees the normative framework (n_e) as dynamic and evolving. Thus, although there is no great difference between the accounts with regard to what exists in the social world, there is a great difference how the “normal” state of the society is seen.

5. Conclusion: Sketching a Critical Social Ontology

Is there a lesson to be learned in the analysis of social-ontological commitments of different conceptions of social pathology? Firstly, it must be stated that making explicit and visible the social-ontological commitments in social philosophy is but one of the possible ways to evaluate critical social theories. As shown above, different theories have different ontological commitments, but instead of the ontological perspective it is possible to evaluate them also from the perspective of their explanatory power or usefulness for actual social critique and social research.

It was hinted above that the more literal views of pathologies, which make a commitment to the existence of real collective entities or structures, offer stronger standards for evaluating societies. This is the case because they present a clearer referent for the evaluation of the functionality of a society: they give a clearer focus for social philosophy or philosophy of society. What is at stake is the reproduction of the society or the processual life of the society as a collective entity. However, the stronger ontological commitments are also philosophically more extravagant. What is needed in support of a nonmetaphorical theory of social pathology is, at least, a social-ontological answer to the individualism-collectivism issue as well as to the question of nonsingularity. If we want to explain what social pathologies (as their own, separate from individual or socially caused pathologies) really are, then we ought to have strong and believable accounts of the myriad interrelations of individual agents, potential group agents, institutions, and structures. Furthermore, if we set emancipation and freedom of individuals as central interests of critical theory, this sets theoretical limits to the ways in

which the above relations can be formulated. For example, strongly collectivistic explanations of structures are incompatible with individual freedom.

With this in mind, we can now sketch a task for critical social ontology: explaining the relationships between individuals, groups, and structures with only such socio-ontological commitments that are compatible with individual agency and freedom. Agency and freedom can obviously be relational, intersubjectively dependent, and so forth. Nevertheless, the structural elements of the theory cannot be accounted in a collectivist sense if one wants to retain the possibility of individual emancipation and critical agency. On the other hand, straying too far into the individualistic side would lose sight of the social and structural elements that are deemed central in the tradition of critical social philosophy.

From this perspective it seems that the critical potential, as upholding the possibility of individual emancipation, can be found from all of the four views on social pathology. However, as described above, they differ on where exactly the society can go wrong and where exactly individual freedom is threatened. This is again a place where critical social ontology can provide clarity. On the one hand, the thin conceptions centering on individual agency have their challenges in giving accounts of the structural causes of social suffering. On the other hand, the more literal conceptions of social pathologies need to give a plausible explanation of the connection between sicknesses of the society and individual suffering. Thus, we have a second aim for a critical social ontology: it should connect the social suffering of individuals and the critical understanding of institutional structures of the society under one theoretical enterprise. In short, in addition to ontologically accommodating freedom, critical social ontology should aim to provide an understanding of social structures and their connection to individual life.

A mere descriptive social ontology fails to fulfil the political (or critical) function critical theory – although it can be helpful in pointing out what sort of elements one needs to consider within a critical social theory. Therefore, as the third aim of critical social ontology, the theoretical understanding of the nature of the social world should include an emotive (or motivational) element that is connected to the social suffering. This is of course a difficult task as it is clear that a mere disclosure of the structural causes of social suffering does not mean that the theoretical disclosure would transform into a social movement for a change for better. Nevertheless, and although this is not the place to argue for it,⁸ unlike Thompson's (2016) rebuttal of recognition theory, I believe that one of the most potential venues of fruitfully combining holistic constitution of individuals, social freedom, and

⁸ See Hirvonen 2019a for a more detailed argument for the proposed position.

institutional mediation of everyday life is precisely through the concept of recognition and the psychological-anthropological grounding of social suffering to misrecognition.

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