

ARTICLE

## The Reification of Non-Human Animals

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### Abstract

This paper takes up Axel Honneth's suggestion that we, in the 21st century Western world, should revisit the Marxian idea of reification; unlike Honneth, however, this paper applies reification to the ways in which humans relate to non-human animals, particularly in the context of scientific experiments. Thinking about these practices through the lens of reification, the paper argues, yields a more helpful understanding of what is regarded as problematic in those practices than the standard animal rights approaches. The second part of the paper offers ways of overcoming reification that go beyond Honneth's idea of recognition by introducing Iris Murdoch's idea of attention. This proposed strategy makes the ethical relevance of reification more salient and makes it possible to counter reification through a practice such as attention which, unlike recognition, can be consciously established.

**Keywords:** reification; Axel Honneth; non-human animals; animal experimentation

### Introduction

In his 2005 Tanner lectures,<sup>1</sup> Axel Honneth aims to update the concept of reification, introduced about a century ago by Gyorgy Lukács,<sup>2</sup> and to link it with social practices that have become, in the present century, increasingly concerning. Reification is described by Lukács, and by Honneth following him, as a sort of “second nature,” a form of *praxis* or an overall stance whereby everything, including oneself, is treated and perceived as a mere thing, in a social context where utility and exchange dominate our way of relating to the world.

Honneth claims that the general contemporary stance, or way of being, in the Western world, which has inherited a long period of capitalist and utilitarian thinking, is such that the concerns about changing attitudes toward the world expressed by Marxist thinkers in the early 20th century are again, and in a renewed fashion, of pressing importance. The problem for Honneth, as for Lukács, is not just or rather not properly ethical—if ethics is considered as the application of moral principles—but epistemological–ontological: the idea that we are thinking and behaving in ways that deny certain important aspects of reality.

Reifying means, in Honneth's sense, to see and treat something or someone as a thing, where “things” are mere tools to be used, which do not elicit any kind of first-personal, engaged, or affective response from the user. The opposite of reification is the acknowledgment of value or significance in the object, demonstrated in types of response that Honneth calls “recognition.”<sup>3</sup>

Honneth's view is that recognition is the basic human way of engaging with the world generally. It follows from this that there is nothing to which, in principle, recognition is not appropriate. That does not mean that there is no room for appropriate instances of detached attitudes but only for particular purposes, and only *once* recognition is in place and has been acknowledged. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that recognition can take different forms depending on the object. For instance, showing recognition for the value of a painting can involve avoiding using it as a door-stopper or to kindle the fire, but it does not involve kissing it goodnight. Showing recognition for the value of a

non-human animal, instead, for instance a pig, can involve refraining from causing the pig pain, or offering shelter, but not normally worrying about the pig's shame in being naked, since pigs do not, as far as we know, typically experience such shame. What this means, perhaps obviously but also importantly, is that recognition is manifested differently where the nature of the object is different.<sup>4</sup>

Honneth's invitation is that we, living in the current historical era, take recognition and reification seriously as paradigms of, respectively, what we have forgotten but should recover, and what we are increasingly, dangerously, doing. Recognition and reification are broad and flexible concepts. In what follows, I argue that one area in which they apply in especially fitting and concerning ways is the human treatment of non-human animals, a treatment which is rooted in a general reificatory attitude toward other species and, if Honneth is right, the world generally. In particular, I focus on how this attitude is starkly exemplified in the biomedical domain in the scientific experiments using non-human animals. My aim is to show how the idea of reification can shed light on the ways non-human animals are used, the problematic nature of such use, and then point in the direction of a solution, by presenting the idea and practice of attention as an antidote, so to speak, to reification.

### Recognition and Reification Beyond the Human

While Honneth suggests that we can apply recognition and reification to virtually anything, most of his discussion and examples are concerned with human beings. Honneth's primary source, Lukács, also introduces reification as occurring when "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing."<sup>5</sup> At the end of his Tanner Lectures, Honneth addresses the possibility of extending the concept of reification to what he calls "non-human objects." These for him include inanimate objects, nature, and non-human animals. Surprisingly and worryingly, this group is not further differentiated. Honneth offers a specific explanation of the problem of reification when it comes to these "non-human objects." Drawing on Theodor Adorno, Honneth claims that "non-human objects" gain their value from other human beings, for whom these objects have significance. By emotionally identifying with other people, we can also understand the significance of the objects they care about, and thus avoid reifying those objects.

This specification suggests a different recognition model based on the nature of the object: With other humans, recognition is direct; with everything else, including non-human animals, recognition has to go through emotional identification with human beings. While this distinction does not bestow value on human beings alone, nor does it remove it from non-human objects, it places what is not human on a different level epistemically if not ontologically.

I maintain that this move, which places non-human animals in the same category as living things (e.g., plants, trees) and inanimate objects, is deeply problematic, both in itself and in the context of 21st century practices of reification.<sup>6</sup> In fact, if we want to understand the phenomenon of reification in most of the contemporary world, we need to focus not only on human beings but on other animals as well. There are at least two major reasons for this.

First, the distinction Honneth draws seems to ignore the fact that recognition is present, spontaneous, and unmediated, when humans interact with other animals as well as when they interact with each other. In the development of young children, for instance—to take the context Honneth uses to make his case for the primacy of recognition<sup>7</sup>—the presence of a companion animal has been shown to develop the empathetic abilities of the child.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, ethologists and psychologists continually discover, in their first-hand experiences with other animals, the possibility of recognizing them as other minded beings.<sup>9</sup> These empathetic responses, in Honneth's own framework, go hand in hand with the recognition of mental states and emotions in the other, in this case, the non-human animal, and therefore with the possibility of recognizing the non-human animal in question as a *subject*. This possibility includes, among others, the cows and pigs that are used for food, or the rats and mice that are experimented upon, where empathetic responses are possible, but often denied—and with them, the recognition of

subjecthood. If this is true, the relevance of personhood for recognition (where persons are understood as “rights-bearing subjects”) present in Honneth’s work is something that needs to be considered not as a requirement for recognition but as a concept that can only be defined *after* real occurrences of recognition are taken into account.<sup>10</sup>

Second, if we at least consider the possibility that non-human animals are subjects, then treating them as mere objects—as mere means to our own ends, to borrow a Kantian phrase—is a stark case of reification: non-human animals are currently the most consistently and most widely reified group of living beings on the planet, and this is so, at least in large part, for precisely the same reasons, involving capitalist commodity exchange and profit, that Lukács was warning us about in stressing the idea of reification.<sup>11</sup> The number of non-human animals whose lives are devoted solely to furthering human purposes has in the last two centuries grown exponentially, and currently counts many billions of individuals (roughly 70 billion land animals<sup>12</sup> and up to 3 trillion fish killed for food<sup>13</sup>; a billion animals killed for leather and 50 million for fur<sup>14</sup>; and 115 million vertebrate animals killed in scientific experiments, per year worldwide.<sup>15</sup>) In these contexts, animals’ lives are, from beginning to (early) end, under the control of humans; their desires may be accounted for or not; despite the Five Freedoms, which act mostly as guidelines, and are subject to human interests considered as more significant or indeed as setting the standards or purpose (e.g., obtaining the desired data in scientific experiments),<sup>16</sup> non-human animals are routinely denied satisfaction of basic needs such as freedom of movement, the ability to bring up their offspring and to socialize, needs which they have in virtue of being subjects, and particular sorts of subjects. For these reasons, the instrumental, subjecthood-denying treatment of non-human animals is not just an instance of reification among others but can be seen as emblematic of contemporary reification.<sup>17</sup>

In this context, animals used in scientific experiments occupy a particular position. The concept of “lab animal” is more recent than that of “farm animal,” although both carry the idea that the very reason these animals exist is to satisfy a human interest: they are animals *for* the laboratory, animals *for* the farm. Laboratory animals, however, are removed from any natural context in which those species might live and have typically no access to the outdoors. Their lives are entirely defined by the artificial space in which they are used. Although nowadays this is sadly true of most animals used for other purposes, it is always true of “lab animals”: their life is defined by being both *for* and *in* the laboratory. As Michael Hauskeller highlights, animals used in scientific experiments are considered to be “models”: this is a significant concept that shows how the animals are not thought of as what they are in themselves, but essentially in terms of what can be discovered *through* them (and often about the human body). Thinking of animals as models is thinking of them as representations, moving away from what the animals are in their own right.<sup>18</sup>

Further, the fact that it is increasingly common, in scientific experiments, to use animals that have been genetically modified shows that the process of reification, of instrumental conceptualization of the animals, extends both to their very existence and to their bodies: their use as instruments is not a particular aspect of their lives but defines their lives from beginning to end. As Hauskeller puts it, in laboratories “animals are not only spoken of as tools and treated as tools, they are quite literally being created as tools.”<sup>19</sup> Technology is increasingly used for handling animals, and the animal products industry is heavily modeled on other kinds of industrial serial production, which was designed to handle “things.”

All of this is true and worrying, of course, if two things can be shown: one is that reification is morally problematic; the other is that (at least some) non-human animals are indeed the sort of beings that can be reified, in other words, that they *are not* mere objects to be used. There is something disquieting about the need to prove this second point. Yet doubts have been raised and are being raised. In the section “Recognition and Reification Beyond the Human,” I discuss how Honneth offers an original and helpful way of understanding animals as subjects, which at the same time explains the discomfort one may feel about certain widespread, and impersonal, ways of proving it. Next, I move on to discuss why reification can be taken as a moral concept, and why, as a consequence, reifying practices are morally concerning.

### A New Case for Non-Human Animals' Subjecthood

The distinction on which I have been drawing in discussing the problem of reification is between subject and object, with reification consisting in taking the former as the latter. The very category of “subject,” however, is far from uncontroversial, and defining it is key to understanding Honneth’s recognition-based view of the problems inherent in reification. On the one hand, we could, for example, take a definition of subjecthood based on certain empirically verifiable criteria, like Tom Regan has famously done. According to Regan, many non-human animals (minimally, mammals and birds) are “subjects of a life” because they possess some of the following properties:

Hav[ing] beliefs and desires; perception, memory, and a sense of the future, including their own future; an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain; preference- and welfare-interests; the ability to initiate action in pursuit of their desires and goals; a psychological identity over time; and an individual welfare in the sense that their experiential life fares well or ill for them, logically independently of their utility for others, and logically independently of their being the object of anyone else’s interests.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note that this is a cluster concept, meaning that there is no fixed number of the above abilities/properties that qualifies a creature for being a subject. But based on it, it seems clear that most animals, certainly most mammals and many birds, are indeed subjects of a life—or, more simply, subjects. Hauskeller’s discussion of the application of reification to non-human animals in scientific experiments follows this line of thought, claiming that animals are subjects because they have natural ends which they pursue for themselves—continued existence being one of them. Reification interferes with the animals’ biological integrity through denying their pursuit of such ends.<sup>21</sup>

The idea here is that it is first and foremost how we *think* about, and *perceive*, animals, when we relate to them as objects, that is the problem. The harm we inflict on animals is a consequence of this, but the problem needs to be addressed at the root, where the injustice is not only in action but also in perception and attitudes.

But how do we know that animals are subject, and hence that treating them as objects violates what they are? Again, there is a feeling of absurdity and disorientation in the need to raise this question. This feeling is especially clear if we take one common way of thinking about subjecthood: as something we establish through empirically verifiable criteria, which *then* allows us to assert that reification is wrong because it denies the subjecthood which is there. This strategy makes reification appear as a category error: reification is a problem because we take as object what is a subject. And what counts as subject can be established before encountering them (or before entering the domain of the ethical broadly understood).

This view of subjecthood also falls prey to familiar objections, such as the one from marginal cases—for example, “What about those beings to whom we attribute value, such as foetuses, who lack most of these properties?”—which in turn raises concern about the very possibility of specifying empirical facts that naturally and necessarily entail having value.<sup>22</sup>

Helpfully, Honneth offers a different kind of approach that connects what animals *are*—their being subjects rather than objects—with their value and the related appropriateness of certain kinds of ways of thinking and acting with respect to them, in a manner that is reciprocal, rather than one-directional. According to Honneth, the world we encounter, and what has value or significance within it, is not presented to us in an impersonally objective manner, something we perceive and understand and to which we *then* apply value, but always through the ways in which we interact with it. If that is true, what defines a subject, for instance, is not a series of tests, such as those performed on non-human animals in psychology labs, but how we respond to them in primitive ways, before the (reifying) second nature takes over. The question “How do I know this animal is a subject” is not a natural one. It is, rather, a sign that we have forgotten—pushed aside—something obvious. The real questions are why and how we have done that, and how we can recover what we have pushed aside.

Honneth links his idea of recognition to Martin Heidegger's notion of "care" as an existential mode of being, as well as to John Dewey's concept of "practical involvement" and to Lukács's idea of "engaged praxis."<sup>23</sup> For all of these philosophers, Honneth writes, "our actions do not primarily have the character of an affectively neutral, cognitive stance toward the world but rather that of an affirmative, existentially colored style of caring comportment."<sup>24</sup> What allows us to say of some non-human animals that they are subjects is, then, the same *kind* of basis that allows us to say it of human beings: not a series of empirically provable properties, but a spontaneous way of relating to them, which at the same time establishes a kind of value which is not merely subjective. If Honneth is right, what defines a subject is neither objective detachment nor subjective projection, but a sphere of practices that does not separate how the world is from how we live within it.

Ludwig Wittgenstein powerfully makes a very similar point by showing how no amount of empirical information can tell us that other human beings have an inner life, in the face of sceptical doubt:

Suppose I say of a friend: "He isn't an automaton."—What information is conveyed by this, and to whom would it be information? To a *human being* who meets him in ordinary circumstances? What information *could* it give him?...

"I believe he is not an automaton," just like that, so far makes no sense.

My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul.<sup>25</sup>

With other animals, human, and non-human alike, our grasp of their consciousness is given by the ways in which we respond to them as minded creatures. Scepticism about other minds and reification, which can be manifestations of one another, conversely occur when we forget that in the moment of reaction or response we already know what it is that we are confronting. In other words, the inner life of other animals, human or not, is not a matter of opinion or abstract reasoning but of responding to them in particular ways. Abstract reasoning and knowledge rather follow from this, like cognition follows recognition.<sup>26</sup> The idea of attitude in Wittgenstein here is akin to Honneth's idea of recognition: Both are spontaneous and unreflective, universal to human beings, and *constitutive* of some concepts, rather than merely a response to their application.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, Wittgenstein uses a non-human living being, and one that is quite different from humans compared to other animals, as an example to express the difference between our unreflective attitudes to things and to living beings:

Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations.—One says to oneself: How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a *sensation to a thing*? One might as well ascribe it to a number!—And now look at a wriggling fly and at once these difficulties vanish and pain seems able to get a foothold here, where before everything was, so to speak, too smooth for it.<sup>28</sup>

Looking at a wriggling fly does not "prove" the presence of sensations, but it does something more important: It allows the concept of sensation to have an application and thus a sense; it makes room for it. It is important to remember that encounters with different animals in different circumstances will make room for different concepts; so reification, while having a common structure, is not the same whenever it occurs.

### The Moral Relevance of Reification

This emphasis on the primacy of recognition is significant because it allows us to consider reifying practices from a moral perspective, which Honneth himself is wary of doing. As we have seen, in Honneth's discussion, reification is not simply a cognitive error, a category mistake, but neither does he call it a moral wrong. He explains this by saying that reification is so deeply rooted as to have become a habit or a form of behavior, rather than a single act of cognition or choice. Thus, we cannot apply to it "ordinary" moral concepts like praise or blame.<sup>29</sup> In other words, since reification is not obviously willed,

it is difficult to assess someone morally for it. This is true, as Honneth himself recognizes, based on a traditional view of morality, of Kantian origin, which is dependent on the exercise of the will.<sup>30</sup>

However, as a number of philosophers, including Iris Murdoch and Bernard Williams in the past century, have more recently argued, the waters of ethics are much murkier than that, and responsibility is a greyer area. For Murdoch, an individual's moral quality depends not only on her will-directed actions but primarily on the background of her consciousness, which is built up at every moment by innumerable influences, apparently insignificant choices, and by the objects on which at various points she focuses her attention.<sup>31</sup> Particular choices or acts of will lose much of their significance if we consider how much of what is salient, what enters our field of vision, and the meaning of what we perceive depends on the long history of our consciousness. By broadening the sphere of the moral in this way, we will be able to situate the question of reification more comfortably within it.<sup>32</sup> This is important, not just theoretically but because by understanding the ramifications of responsibility we can also understand why reifying behavior is worrying and how to change it—not by a single act of will but in a more complex and lengthy manner.

Reifying is worrying both in itself and for its practical consequences: It involves, on the one hand, an un-virtuous display of bad faith; however, below the surface of conscious awareness it may be, and the refusal or inability to do justice to the object; and on the other, and from a consequentialist perspective, it involves possibly harmful actions resulting from this process. When it comes to other animals, the moral concerns related to reification have precisely this two fold structure. First, reification of animals consists in routinely denying, through habitual mental deflection, the natural responses that we as humans typically have to other animals, and hence denying their subjective lives; or in avoiding the possibility for these responses to arise, by putting in place a significant cognitive and imaginative distance between the living animals and the products that are sold and consumed,<sup>33</sup> and a physical distance between human dwellings and laboratories, farms, and slaughterhouses, where animals are hidden from view.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, reification also, as a consequence, involves the instrumental use that is evident in the case of most of the non-human animals bred for human purposes, be it in scientific laboratories, farms, or zoos, where harm is inflicted through physical and psychological pain, confinement, and death. The distance created by reification makes the particular kind of harm routinely inflicted on non-human animals possible.

In other words, if recognition involves how we respond to others, and reification is about how we fail to recognize and thus respond to others, both these attitudes have major significance, not only in terms of being truthful and doing justice to their objects but also in terms of the consequences of erroneous epistemic attitudes, both of which, I am suggesting, are in plain sight today when it comes to the human use of other animals. While the questions of treatment and consequences are normally agreed to fall within the ethical domain, we can now see that the epistemic attitudes that ground these questions are not divorced from the ethical sphere either, not just because of what they make possible, but also because evaluation is already present in the formation of our conception of the object's nature.<sup>35</sup>

Reification, for Honneth, is a denial or “forgetting”: What we forget, in reifying someone, is not just their reality and value, but the attitudes of recognition that we *already* have toward them, with which reality and value are bound up. Reification covers up recognition. It is a stance or attitude of detached observation or contemplation, denying the other the responsiveness that would be appropriate, thus effectively reducing them to a thing. Reification removes responses, interaction, involvement, empathy, and replaces them with a separation of subject and object, where the subject's approach to the object is merely cognitive, detached, and impersonally objective.

Importantly, it also follows that in reification, as Honneth notes, one also reifies *oneself*, by ignoring the responses and attitudes that would show one that the object of cognition is not something to be merely observed, but something or someone to be responded to; it is something that has *significance*, and not just merely objective attributes. When it comes to ourselves, too, reification is a “forgetting,” a putting aside of responses that would otherwise come naturally to us. That, in turn, changes the nature of our responses and therefore of our perceptions.<sup>36</sup>

### Why We Reify Other Animals

Honneth offers several arguments, philosophical but also drawing on developmental psychology, to show that recognition is both temporally and conceptually primary. In the reification of animals, one significant example is the insistence with which the recognition of the animals which we are in some way exploiting is denied and avoided.<sup>37</sup> Recognition of other animals is perceived as a threat, for it would bring about radical changes in an anthropocentric society which exploits other animals in so many of its activities. In contemporary Western society, Honneth claims, reification does not occur through a single act of will, but through a deeply rooted set of practices, which may have initially been brought about by various self-directed interests, not least economic interests, which also apply overwhelmingly to the use of animal bodies. Then, it is precisely the awareness of the possibility of recognition that makes a reifying attitude feel necessary. This goes together with the fact, as we saw above, that the language we use to talk about non-human animals used for human purposes is often the same as the language used to talk about things. Laboratory animals, for instance, are not killed but “terminated” or “destroyed,” thus distancing us further from them.<sup>38</sup>

In the context of animal use, and in a particular way in the context of scientific experiments, reification presents itself with especial clarity. The totalizing aspect of the animal’s instrumentality defines both their lives and the way we conceptualize those animals. Their use defines their existence, rather than being one aspect of it. This fits with the further fact that, like other animals, laboratory animals are human property. It is part of the definition of being property that objects (or, in this case, subjects) owned have no freedom over themselves nor over their lives. Another significant aspect of their subjecthood is, in this way, removed.<sup>39</sup>

These practices, alongside the other uses of non-human animals, give us reasons to think that reification has reached significant, concerning, and possibly unique heights in this century when it comes to non-human animals. Honneth’s thought is helpful here also to suggest some of the major driving factors behind such large-scale and consistent reification of animal life, but other factors need to be added before we reach the reasons he offers. First, current physical interaction with other animals is limited, especially in urban spaces; this brings about a lack of familiarity, which means it can require greater attention in order to understand other animals’ subjective life (with the clear exception of companion animals); second, other animals do not demand recognition in the same way that other humans do, both because most of them do not (or we do not let them) share our social contexts,<sup>40</sup> and because the animals we use are not (anymore) a threat to us but are normally unable to defend themselves from exploitation; third, there is at present a great interest to use non-human animals as resources, since they are the source of profit and relatively inexpensive scientific resources; fourth, for humans to continue thinking of themselves as having special or unique value, they need to emphasize their difference from other animals. These reasons match with those that Honneth offers for reification in the human context, namely having personal goals that overshadow other, more important factors, and maintaining a certain kind of prejudice, which includes conceptual categories that simplify the task of thinking and living as we already do.<sup>41</sup>

### Attention Against Reification

We can now return to Honneth’s important observation that reification involves both object and subject alike. Indeed, just like recognition, a reifying attitude links subject and object inextricably, but in a different way. This is so because it is through detachment from, or denial of, one’s own attitudes and responses that the understanding of the object as a mere thing is made possible. If we pay attention to our immediate responses to other animals, we can see that we very rarely respond to them as we would to mere things. We may be frightened, baffled, and angry, but our behavior tends to show that we are relating to subjects not to objects. And from this comes the understanding, not only of what these animals are (subjects of a life, among other things) but of the kinds of *claims* they make on us—to adapt Stanley Cavell’s observations.<sup>42</sup> To really understand another subject is to respond to their claim. And the

claim of another subject involves, primarily, treating them in ways that fit with their being a subject—not to be coerced, confined, exploited, or owned.

Attending both to the other (human or non-human) and to ourselves, I want to suggest, is key to the possibility of overcoming the problem of reification. The kind of attention I have in mind comes from Iris Murdoch, for whom attention is key to the moral life. For Murdoch, attention is an attitude of receptivity that is focused on a specific object, but it is also open and selfless, willing to take in rather than impose content and meaning. Murdoch describes attention as a “just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.”<sup>43</sup> Fitting with Honneth’s theory, attention is “just” and not merely “accurate,” because some things, if not all things, are not fully grasped from a detached impersonal stance—and it is “loving,” because, as Honneth also reminds us, cognition without affect is (in an important sense) blind.

If reification is a covering up, a forgetting, then what is needed (and true) is already available. It is both in the object—here, the other animals, and the fact that they are conscious living subjects—and in ourselves at the same time—in our reactions that display our awareness of what they are. To contrast reification which has become second nature, then, what is needed is to bring these two elements back to awareness. This is the task of attention. As Honneth writes, in reification “a kind of *reduced attentiveness* must be at issue, which causes the *fact* of recognition to fall into the background and thus to slip out of our sight” (first emphasis added).<sup>44</sup> Recognition is a fact: by attending both to other animals and to our own engaged responses we can uncover what we already know, and think and behave accordingly.

Thus, attention stands at the opposite end of reification, and one level above recognition: Like reification, it develops out of primary recognition. But instead of silencing recognition, attention brings it to awareness, ensuring that it is neither distorted nor suppressed—whether by fear, interest, convention, or any of the manifold impediments that, according to Murdoch, often originate in self-concern.<sup>45</sup> Attention is a “passive activity”: In its openness and suppression of self-regarding concern, it eliminates the veil that not only distorts reality but also hides the responsive recognition that itself shapes and defines that reality.

Bestowing attention upon animals used in the laboratory can help to bring out something we already know, but which has radical consequence: that these animals are subjects. Attention to the animal will, at the same time, cause responses in us, to which we can also be attentive, not in isolation, but through attention to the animal: the response, as Honneth tells us, is not a consequence of our cognition of the other, but *part* of our understanding of what the other is. One feature that will become salient if we attend to most animals used in scientific experiment is this: that they do not want to participate in those experiments; they do not want to be there. They retreat to the bottom of the cage, shake, make fearful sounds, and so on. In such cases, their inner life is not hard to discern, even to the untrained eye, and only some amount of denial of primary recognition can lead us to cast doubt on it. What these animals are manifesting is not only an inner life but their own *agency*, and specifically their *dissent*.

Taking dissent into account in research ethics is part of an expansion of animal ethics toward, on the one hand, the response-dependent nature of our understanding of other animals (following Cora Diamond)<sup>46</sup> and, on the other, the inclusion of animal agency into what we should protect, beyond animal interests (see, e.g., Sue Donaldson’s work).<sup>47</sup> These two developments go hand in hand, because part of recognizing an animal’s value through our responses to her is recognizing her as a minded individual, with her own life, preferences and desires, and the capacity to manifest those preferences and desires. Following Honneth’s suggestion means realizing that these are not features to be inferred but are already visible to us in our lives with other animals.

The growing suggestion to take dissent (and in some cases assent) seriously in research involving non-human animals represents an acknowledgement that valuing their lives needs to include valuing their agency.<sup>48</sup> My suggestion is that such valuing is already, pre-reflectively available to us, and it can be recovered by the exercise of attention. It is important that attention inhabits the space of ethics as I defined it more broadly above, where the will has a role, but the will itself is also shaped by habits, patterns of thinking, and the influence of the manifold previous objects of attention that configure the tissue of our consciousness (to use a Murdochian expression). That way, to become more attentive becomes a possibility even in a reified context, not by switching attention on and off through an act of will but by



constantly reminding ourselves of our involvement in the perception of a given situation and of the need to separate the objects of our consciousness from our self-interest.

Differently from Honneth, Murdoch often talks about attention exercised by individuals and of attending as overcoming self-created obstacles. This could seem like a key difference that makes attention ill adapted to be placed at the opposite end of reification. However, Murdoch's emphasis on the individual can easily be overestimated, sometimes forgetting that what constitutes the self that attends or fails to attend is to a large extent determined by the individual's surroundings, including social contexts (in fact, Murdoch talks about convention and neurosis, both of which relate the individual to her social milieu, as two clear impediments to attention).<sup>49</sup> Conversely, Honneth's Marxian analysis, although grounded in social and economic practices, does not deny the possibility of individual efforts to recognize reification and recover recognition.

### What Attention Demands

These considerations, and the possibility of attending to non-human animals and to ourselves as we relate—or avoid relating—to them, can lead to very simple, but very significant, conclusions. If we discover, or rather, with Honneth, remember, through responsive practices recovered through attention, that animals are subjects and not things, our ways of interacting with them will display that awareness, which would bring about significant changes in current practices. It may be tempting to say that animals ought not to be treated as things. Yet this formulation can be misleading: Based on Honneth's framework just presented, this "ought" is not to be understood as a command or rule applied to facts impersonally discovered, but as a moral, affective, and *conceptual* necessity—all of these inextricably. Through attention, we recover the awareness of the subjecthood of animals, but subjects cannot consistently be thought of and treated as mere means to an end. Therefore, all the forms of exploitation of animals in which they are either wholly or *primarily* treated as mere resources, such as in experimenting, farming, or entertainment, become no longer, not just morally acceptable, but no longer *conceptually* fitting with the idea of animal developed through attentive recognition. Elaborating on Honneth, we can say that the recognition of another animal, fostered by attention, includes recognizing, not as a matter of impersonal observation but of felt acknowledgment, the animal's mental life, and experience, including pleasure, happiness, and the continuation of life as something desirable, and pain, restraint, coercion, and death as something to be avoided.<sup>50</sup> This ability to respond consistently to the animal's experience shows why conceptualizing animals as subjects and the related abandonment of exploitation are not a mere human projection, but world-driven and consistent with every other case in which we are able to exercise recognition. In the context of animal research, responding to the animals' dissent involves a double "no": The "no" communicated (often quite clearly) by the animal, and the "no" of the recognition that merely instrumental use is not appropriate to the kind of being that is in front of us. The radical consequence of this is that very few uses of animals in research (and elsewhere) are morally permissible (including, as Jane Johnson suggests, non-harmful research that the animal enjoys or willingly engages in)<sup>51</sup> and that the burden of proof will lie on those wishing to demonstrate their permissibility.<sup>52</sup>

Two objections may be raised here. The first is that the forms of animal use, such as experimenting on animals in scientific research, uses that involve inflicting pain on animals, killing them, and owning them, do not necessarily, as such, involve a reifying attitude. The second objection is that the detached attitude that leads to reification is not always morally wrong, especially in the context of science, where detachment is part and parcel of the scientific endeavor.

The first objection is often supported by two opposite kind of examples, but both leading in the same direction: one is the cases of the individual working in a lab who grow attached to the animals there; the other is the development of cruel and aggressive reactions in laboratory staff in response to animal pain (a kind of behavior infamously symbolized by the "head injury studies on baboons" at the University of Pennsylvania in 1983–1984).<sup>53</sup> Both cases, although differently, show that the animal's capacity for pain is recognized.<sup>54</sup> Both examples seem to offer themselves as cases showing that reification is not as widespread nor deeply ingrained as I have been suggesting.

In the first example, it is important to note how the care of animals is increasingly handed over to veterinarians and animal caregivers, who have little to do with the experiments themselves.<sup>55</sup> This enables a form of “division of labor”<sup>56</sup> in terms of affect and recognition, which makes it possible for the scientists to remain more detached from the animals they perform experiments on. At the same time, although veterinarians and caregivers frequently experience distress about the pain and death of the animals, this is something that training seeks to diminish,<sup>57</sup> rather than addressing the causes of the distress and recognizing that such emotional responses point in the direction of something problematic, not in the caregivers, but in the practices.

Both examples exist within *social structures* where the only reason for the animals’ existence, as discussed above, is their potential contribution to human knowledge. And this entrenched framework, as Honneth’s Marxian analysis shows, hardly leaves individual attitudes untouched. The degrees to which it touches them, however, can vary. Although these examples may go against the idea that reification is universal in, and necessary to, the practices of those who are primarily involved in the instrumental use of animals, they do not contradict the claim that reifying attitudes dominate the majority of the population, who do not have such personal involvement. Arnold Arluke’s studies have shown that, in scientific experiments, cases of recognition are not the norm: “Objectification is ... the most prevalent stance towards laboratory animals and... de-individualization is a principal technique by which this is accomplished.”<sup>58</sup> It is only as individuals that animals, like humans, can be properly recognized, attended to, and responded to. De-individualization is a step toward reification. The second example above shows how recognition, suppressed in the context of an instrumental use of the animals, emerges in violent, unhealthy ways. Although the case of violence is indeed an instance of a form of recognition, responding to a sentient being with the infliction of more pain can be explained by a social structure that places the animals (also legally) under the control of humans, together with the emotional distress and frustrations that are not uncommon among laboratory workers.<sup>59</sup>

But when it comes to those few individuals who do grow attached to the animals, and show some signs of care, while also handling them as resources and subsequently inflicting, or allowing others to inflict, pain and death on them—we still need to account for them. These cases are sometimes presented as supporting the second objection offered above, namely that a scientific impersonal attitude is not always morally problematic, indeed it is sometimes beneficial and part and parcel of correct scientific practices. This is the sort of defense that Martha Nussbaum has offered in relation to the related concept of objectification: It is possible to take my partner as pillow, thus objectifying her, without disrespecting him or violating her in some other way.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, doctors sometimes need to be able to switch to a detached perspective when examining their patients, and so do scientists when performing experiments, because the accuracy of the results is improved by taking this perspective. So instances of empathy, kindness, and so forth to lab animals can be taken as proof that these animals are not reified, but seen, emotionally and responsively, *both* as subjects *and also* as objects to be used (bred, killed, confined) for human purposes.

For this objection to carry some weight, it needs to be shown not just that some technicians are able to respond to animals some of the time and reify them at other times (when they use them in painful experiments). What needs to be shown is that those who work in the animal industry can have the same responsive attitude at both times, when they care for animals and when they use them and inflict pain on them. This seems, first of all, conceptually implausible: care is not consistent with the infliction of pain or death, unless such actions benefit the object of care. Moreover, if attention includes having a grasp of the inner states of the other, the fear and pain of animals at those crucial moments will be a *prima facie* reason not to cause such fear and pain. If other reasons interfere with this, they will inevitably come into conflict with what attentive recognition demands, and that is not an innocent conflict.

These instances bring out two important aspects that distinguish objectification as discussed by Nussbaum and reification as understood here following Honneth: Reification is a “second nature” not an attitude that one can easily switch on and off; reification is totalizing, and it excludes, at least for as long as it is adopted, seeing the other as a subject. Here the “mere” in “relating to the other as mere object” becomes important. Although one may use one’s partner as pillow and at the same time recognize them as that particular person that they are, and although it is possible for patient to walk out of the surgery and resume their lives as individual persons, and for the doctor to shake the patient’s hand in an attitude of

recognition, reification excludes these options. A reifying attitude is not impossible to overcome, but, while it exists, it is not combined with recognition in any explicit way.<sup>61</sup>

This is why the example of sadistic violence may go further in pressing the objection that instrumental use and the infliction of pain and death may not be necessarily instances of reification. In the violent behavior of a laboratory worker, both recognition and the wish to harm are present, and they are not incompatible. This suggests another troubling possibility: perhaps spontaneous recognition of another as an independent, sentient, conscious subject goes together with a number of responses, not all of them ethically desirable. Commenting on Honneth, Jonathan Lear acknowledges that something even less palatable than this is possible: “What if the original condition was a mixed bag? What if we started out as greedy competitive aggressive envious jealous murderous animals?”<sup>62</sup>

That is why recognition is not enough, and we need attention. Just like reification is forgetting recognition, attention is taking recognition into the open. And recognition, as Honneth defines it, includes a kind of empathy: not only knowing that the other is in pain, but also experiencing the pain as (typically) something destructive, to be feared, undesirable, and so on, with different experiences. Attention brings out these potentialities of recognition, lying dormant when recognition is suppressed or forgotten.<sup>63</sup> As Murdoch defines it, attention is not a neutral, “accurate” gaze, like that of the scientist (which is not actually “neutral,” but *one way* of looking among others, chosen for particular purposes), but a gaze that seeks to do justice to the object, including their needs, and at the same time suppresses self-interest.

Attention, then, is the epistemic attitude that can counter reification. If attention is both a habit and an activity, it is possible to gradually stop the reification of animals in one major way—through presence. Taken literally, this may not be easy, not just because most species of living animals tend to be absent from most (urban) lives but also because the contexts in which we do encounter animals are those in which the power relationships are already determined by practices that take animals as human resources: This is true, for instance, not only of laboratory animals but also those in zoos and in farms. Animal sanctuaries and the observation of wild animals may be better contexts of encounter, because they are less dependent on these structures. Yet, even the more controlled contexts do not render the experience of encounter and recognition impossible and are, at least, ways that we have available to enable us to engage with what non-human animals are, in the only way, as Honneth suggests, in which we can fully understand someone or something, that is, through immediate, emotional responsiveness. There is also room here for less literal encounters, for imagination and truthful artistic representation, for example, in literature, where the encounter is imagined but not for this reason lacking in truthfulness or potential for real recognition. Thus attention, like reification, can become a general attitude, or even second nature. It is harder to be attentive because, as Murdoch points out, we have not only socioeconomic but also psychological leanings toward self-interested attitudes, and self-interest easily leads to reifying what we may want to just use. But attention has truthfulness on its side, the possibility of doing justice not only to what we encounter but also to ourselves. And this, I have argued, is all the more pressing in our contemporary world when it comes to non-human animals.<sup>64</sup>

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## Notes

1. Honneth, A. Reification: A recognition-theoretical view. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values. Delivered University of California, Berkeley, March 14–16, 2005; available at [http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/h/Honneth\\_2006.pdf](http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/h/Honneth_2006.pdf) (last accessed 15 June 2017); and Honneth, A. *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2008.
2. Lukács, G. Reification and the consciousness of the Proletariat. In: *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Livingstone R, trans. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; 1971:83–222.

3. See Honneth, A. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge: Polity Press; 1995.
4. This may look like a distinction based on the differing inherent value of something or a distinction based on the interests something/someone has in her/him/itself. There is something true in this, but the concept of “inherent value” is not standard in Honneth. As I explain in greater detail below, Honneth does not defend recognition as awareness of mind-independent value, but rather value emerges from recognition and is therefore the product, so to speak, of interaction between the valuing subject and the bearer of value.
5. See note 2, Lukács 1971, at 83. Quoted in: See note 1, Honneth 2008, at 21.
6. For applications of Honneth’s idea of reification the environment, see Vogel S. *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; 2015; Hailwood S. *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
7. See note 1, Honneth 2005, at 114–9.
8. See, for example, Poresky RH, Hedrix C. Differential effects of pet presence and pet-bonding on young children. *Psychological Reports* 1990;67(1):51–4.
9. Compare, for instance Smuts B. Encounters with animal minds. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2001;8(5–7):293–309.
10. See note 3, Honneth 1995, at 21.
11. Dinesh Wadiwel argues that human relationships with non-human animals are essentially hostile and violence is a dominating factor, secured by property laws. See Wadiwel D. *The War Against Animals*. Leiden/Boston: Brill Rodopi; 2015.
12. See CIWF Strategic Plan 2013–2017; available at [https://www.ciwf.org.uk/media/3640540/ciwf\\_strategic\\_plan\\_20132017.pdf](https://www.ciwf.org.uk/media/3640540/ciwf_strategic_plan_20132017.pdf) (last accessed 9 Oct 2022).
13. Including between 0.97 and 2.7 trillion fish caught from the wild and between 37 and 120 billion farmed fished slaughtered. See <http://fishcount.org.uk/fish-count-estimates>, with statistics from FAO.
14. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Slaughtered/Production Animals 2012, FAOSTAT Database (last accessed 24 Apr 2014).
15. Taylor K., Gordon, N., Langley, G., Higgins, W. Estimates of worldwide laboratory animal use in 2005. *Alternatives to Laboratory Animals* 2008;36:327–42.
16. For a critique of the five freedoms, see Mellor DJ. Updating animal welfare thinking: Moving beyond the “five freedoms” towards “a life worth living”. *Animals* 2016;6(21).
17. For a discussion of the reification of non-human animals in food production, expanding on these points and making other important ones, see Kortetmäki T. The reification of non-human nature. *Environmental Values* 2019;28(4):489–506. Indeed, food production represents the most habitual, numerically staggering, and in that sense worst, context of reification of life.
18. See Hauskeller M. The reification of life. *Genomics, Society and Politics* 2007;3(2):70–81, at 74–7.
19. See note 18, Hauskeller 2007, at 77.
20. Regan T. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press; 1983:243. Regan uses this notion to argue that, since animals have an independent life that matters to them, they also have inherent value which should be respected, and it is therefore wrong of us to treat them as mere means to our own ends. That would mean, along Honnethian lines, treating them as mere things, overlooking their nature as other-than-thing.
21. See note 18, Hauskeller 2007, at 79.
22. This worry does not need to give rise to fatal objections—Peter Singer, for example, solves it by appealing to interests that are connected to some of the above properties, rather than attributing value to the properties themselves. Whether or not one accepts Singer’s solution, the worry about linking value to properties, directly or indirectly, is more urgent and appropriate when trying to deny value based on the absence of a particular property. Narrowing the moral circle should concern us more than expanding it.
23. See note 1, Honneth 2005, at 106–13.
24. See note 1, Honneth 2005, at 111.

25. Wittgenstein L. *Philosophical Investigations*. Anscombe GEM, Hacker PMS, and Schulte J, eds. Chichester: Wiley and Sons; 2010:178.
26. See note 25, Wittgenstein L. 2010, at §38.
27. This is why, incidentally, theories in animal ethics that either attribute or deny value to animals based only on empirically established criteria—sentience, memory, concept-use—tend to miss something important about animal value.
28. See note 25, Wittgenstein L. 2010, at §284.
29. See note 1, Honneth 2005, at 125.
30. See note 1, Honneth 2005, at 100.
31. Murdoch I. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge; 1970, at 37–40. On Murdoch and attention see Caprioglio Panizza S. *The Ethics of Attention*. New York: Routledge; 2022.
32. Honneth also concedes that there is something normative about reification (see note 1, Honneth 2005, at 100), in the implication it contains that a reified object is not perceived as it ought to be perceived. But his interest lies in the ontological and existential domains, and he appears to prefer to keep these spheres separate from morality. What I suggest here, following Murdoch, is that we have no reason to maintain this separation, and that Honneth’s ideas concerning evaluative attitudes can support this framework.
33. Carol Adams’s work on feminist vegetarianism revolves to a large extent around this distancing, liking the way we remove the living animal from consciousness when we use or consume her/him to the ways we remove from consciousness the individual woman being exploited, sexually or otherwise. Thus animals and women become the “absent referent,” whose presence is necessary (there must have been an animal for there to be meat) but which must at the same time be removed for the exploitative act to take place. See Adams C. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. New York: Continuum; 1990.
34. JM Coetzee’s character Elizabeth Costello makes this point powerfully, in the context of delineating the idea of “willed ignorance,” which comes close to the way I am interpreting reification—as a form of ignorance or forgetting of something one does know, but the ignoring of which does not derive simply from a conscious act of will; it derives, rather, from deep and habitual ways of relating to the world, and/or from a psychological necessity not to face something which would throw one’s belief in the goodness of life/oneself into chaos: “I was taken on a drive around Waltham this morning. It seems a pleasant enough town. I saw no horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, no abattoirs. Yet I am sure they are here. They must be. They simply do not advertise themselves. They are all around us as I speak, only we do not, in a certain sense, know about them.” Coetzee JM. *The Lives of Animals. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values. Delivered Princeton University, October 15–16; 1997:119; available at [https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/c/Coetzee99.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/c/Coetzee99.pdf) (last accessed 6 Dec 2017).*
35. Honneth notes this, although he does not draw out the consequences I am suggesting in relation to moral action: “the notion that the stance of empathetic engagement in the world, arising from the experience of the world’s significance and value [*Werthaftigkeit*], is prior to our acts of detached cognition. A recognitional stance therefore embodies our active and constant assessment of the value that persons or things have in themselves.” See note 1, Honneth 2005, at 111.
36. See note 1, Honneth 2005, at 105–6.
37. The adverse reaction of people who do not want to be reminded that what they are eating or wearing was once in fact a living being shows both the recognition hiding behind the current practice and the wish to suppress it. Carol Adams’s theory of the “absent referent” is again relevant here. See note 33, Adams 1990.
38. See also, in other contexts, the use of “processed” for the handling of animal bodies or the word “livestock” to refer to cows and pigs, and so forth.
39. This point has been made extensively by Gary Francione, who argues that because animals have the legal status of property, albeit a special sort of property, their interests, when they do count, will always count as less important than those of their owners, and consequently the concept of right has a

- poor application when someone is someone else's property. See Francione G. *Animals, Property, and the Law*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press; 1995. See also note 7, Wadiwel 2015, at 147–73.
40. Companion animals are sometimes an exception to this, though recognition of companion animals is also not to be taken for granted.
  41. Or, as Honneth puts it, “a retroactive denial of recognition for the sake of preserving a prejudice or stereotype.” See note 1, Honneth 2005, at 131.
  42. See Cavell S. *The Claim of Reason*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1979.
  43. See note 31, Murdoch 1970, at 20.
  44. See note 1, Honneth 2005, at 130.
  45. “In the moral life,” Murdoch writes in a much-quoted passage, “the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly... the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat.” See note 31, Murdoch 1970, at 52. I suggest that we take the ego broadly and understand it as anything that leads us to act and think in ways that are, in some way, self-protective, self-gratifying, or self-reassuring. Taken this way, the ego can indeed explain many cases of distortion and denial that get in the way of goodness and justice, including reification, the case of animals being a particularly clear one.
  46. Diamond C. Eating meat, eating people. *Philosophy* 1978;53(206): 465–79.
  47. Donaldson S. Animal agora: Animal citizens and the democratic challenge. *Social Theory and Practice* 2020;46(4):709–35.
  48. Kantin H, Wendler D. Is there a role for assent or dissent in animal research? *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 2015;24(4):459–72; Johnson J. Dissenting animals. *Australasian Animal Studies Association*. August 16, 2017; available at <https://animalstudies.org.au/archives/6142> (last accessed 22 June 2022); Healey R, Pepper A. Interspecies justice: Agency, self-determination, and assent. *Philosophical Studies* 2021;178(4):1223–43; Martin A. Animal research that respects animal rights: Extending requirements for research with humans to animals. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 2022;31(1):59–72.
  49. See Holland M. Social convention and neurosis as obstacles to moral freedom. In: Broackes J, ed. *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2012:255–74.
  50. The moral significance of animal death, as opposed to pain and suffering, has been disputed in the literature. For a discussion of the various position, see Harman E. The moral significance of animal pain and animal death. In: Beauchamp TL, Frey RG, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2011.
  51. See note 48, Johnson 2017.
  52. The potential benefits deriving from painful research are not taken as a reason to use dissenting human subjects. Why should it be a reason to use dissenting animals?
  53. Footage from the laboratories shows researchers laughing as they inflicted brain damage on baboons. A documentary on this was subsequently released: Newkirk I, Pacheco A. *Unnecessary Fuss*. [video] PETA; 1984.
  54. This phenomenon is clearly not limited to the scientific contexts: parallels can be found in the case of farmers who grow attached to the animals they subsequently take to the slaughterhouse and treat them kindly up until that point, and in the fact that sometimes workers in the animal industry, more often people working in slaughterhouses, in fact, display a violent and aggressive attitude toward animals, which shows that they do recognise animals as subjects capable of feeling pain and thus fitting objects of anger.
  55. Chang FT, Hard LA. Human-animal bonds in the laboratory: How animal behavior affects the perspective of caregivers. *ILAR Journal* 2002;43(1):10–8.
  56. Birke L, Arluke A, Michael M. *The Sacrifice: How Scientific Experiments Transform Animals and People*. West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press; 2007:93.
  57. See for example, this pamphlet: American Association for Laboratory Animal Science. *Cost of Caring: Recognizing Human Emotions in the Care of Laboratory Animals*. Memphis, TN: American Association for Laboratory Animal Science; 2001.

58. Arluke A. The individualization of laboratory animals. *Humane Innov Alt Anim Exp* 1990;4:199–201, at 1999.
59. Hart LA, Mader B. Pretense and hidden feelings in the humane society environment: A source of stress. *Psych Rep* 1995;77:554.
60. Nussbaum M. Objectification. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1995;24(4):249–91.
61. I am grateful to Maurizio Mori and Vera Tripodi for our discussion on this point.
62. Lear, J. The Slippery Middle. In: Honneth, A. *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2008, at 131.
63. This is true without appealing to moral realism. If moral realism is true, which Murdoch's philosophy suggests, then there is a simpler answer to this problem: the attentive gaze reveals the moral reality, and that will include which responses are appropriate and which are not.
64. I would like to thank Patrizia Setola, Jane Jonhson, and Anna Smajdor for helpful comments on this paper, and the participant at the workshop 'The recognition and reification of non-capacitous human and nonhuman animals' at the University of Oslo (2017) for discussion.