**Axel Honneth’s Cosmopolitanism:**

**The ‘Forgetfulness’ of Global Poverty as a form of Reification[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Abstract:** Amid now extensive debates about cosmopolitanism in political theory, this article explores the implications of Axel Honneth’s recognition theory for issues in international justice, not least the dire situation of poverty in the world. In contrast with a purely resource-distributive approach, the essay turns particularly to Honneth’s recent revival of the Lukácsian concept of reification as a process of self-distancing from the elementary humanity of others. Specifically, Honneth re-formulates reification as a failure of an elementary or ‘antecedent’ form of recognition. From the perspective of his theory, reification connotes the forgetfulness of others’ fundamental humanity. While Honneth takes such forgetfulness to become most readily apparent in dramatic violations such as the Holocaust, the article interprets his theory to explain, and eventually to challenge, the passive acceptance by many of dire material injustices. The paper develops the implications of this challenge by interpreting from Honneth’s framework a duty to question international policies which tend to reify and objectify the least well off in the world, whilst remaining cognizant of the limits of de-reification to the more extensive, meaningful alleviation of poverty globally.

**Keywords:** antecedent recognition; cosmopolitanism; global poverty; reification; Lukács; Honneth; material redistribution

**1. Introduction.**

Recent resources for addressing issues of global justice have been found in Axel Honneth’s widely discussed theory of recognition (Schweiger, 2013; Heins, 2008; Seglow, 2009). Whilst research in this area has been crucial, ambiguities persist in applying Honneth’s moral recognition theory to issues which most concern cosmopolitan writers, especially the dire poverty affecting millions of people around the world. This condition renders human lives precarious through a radical inequality of unprecedented proportions (Hayden, 2007).[[2]](#footnote-2)

In responding to such a large and complex issue, this article turns attention away from Honneth’s substantive moral theory to his less discussed theory of ‘antecedent’ recognition, alongside his corresponding reconception of the idea of ‘reification’. Honneth’s formulation of these concepts supports my central claim that the issue of world poverty would be most productively addressed in normative political theory not by determining causal responsibility, but by emphasising how the inaction of the better-off is often normalized in such a way that violates a core principle of human empathy. Confronted with the large structural injustices which result in persistent global poverty, the article aligns Honneth’s theory with Iris Young’s (2006) ‘social connection’ theory of global justice to interpret from the former a cosmopolitan bond, or a shareable conception of human nature, obtaining irrespective of direct causation of distress and suffering in the world. This minimal bond between people in different social and economic locations eventually supports a limited but significant remedial duty.

More specifically, the article contends that the concepts of antecedent recognition and reification morally challenge widespread disengagement from global economic problems, especially in more affluent nations. This core critique implies a duty to act for what I term the ‘de-reification’ of the extremely poor, mainly by reflecting on and urging for widening international economic policies to fully recognise the agency of the millions who suffer. Whilst admittedly an ambiguous concept, this article understands agency in this context to consist at least in the psychological and material wherewithal to act independently and to live above the realm of mere physical survival. If poverty may be conceptualised as inhuman, by entailing conditions that undermine human capacities for agency so conceived*,* rather than primarily as a violation of economic rights or as a decrease in utility (Metz, 2016: 327), Honneth’s theory offers important tools to contest this predicament. While sustainable intervention for full poverty eradication would entail efforts to empower which transcend de-reification, this interpretation of Honneth’s theory seems crucial at an elementary level.

The argument presented does not disregard the selfless concern of many relatively affluent people who are active in poverty alleviation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Neither is it intended to oversimplify the reasons for the inaction of many people with respect to deep economic problems, which are often related to their own personal hardships (Van Heerde and Hudson, 2010). Yet despite these caveats, the article interprets Honneth’s theory to contest the passivity that leads to the tendency to discount the complex problem of world poverty as deserving a concerted response. An indication of the depth of the issue may be gained by considering recent OECD figures in the United States. These figures suggest that individual contributions to ‘global causes’ through philanthropic donation amount to $12 billion per year, a sum which translates into an average donation per person of one-thousandth of their annual income (Gabriel, 2016: n.1). Whilst this article will eventually question even the efficacy of private philanthropy, the figures bring to light a seemingly widespread muted and ambivalent response to the issue. Moreover, from the perspective of Honneth’s recognition theory, they suggest a level of disengagement which seems to violate a reciprocal relationship with other humans, respect for whose agency is necessary to securing one’s own. Following these insights, this article sets out to interpret from Honneth’s theory of antecedent recognition and reification a duty to oppose, in his evocative phrase, the ‘forgetfulness of recognition’ (2008a: 124). Beginning with problems of deprivation which have motivated more familiar cosmopolitan approaches of Pogge (2005) and Singer (2009), Honneth’s theory presents potent conceptual tools to respond to the urgency of problems of world poverty today.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 contextualises Honneth’s explicit thoughts concerning global justice, and the drawbacks of theorising this condition from within his substantive moral theory. Section 3 turns to Honneth’s re-conception of the idea of reification as a failure of a more fundamental, ‘antecedent’ conception of recognition. These concepts are interpreted morally to critique the inaction of many affluent people towards entrenched poverty in the world. After providing concrete examples of reification and the duty to de-reify the global poor which may be constructively interpreted from Honneth’s theory in section 4, by referring to Young’s analogous ‘social connection’ model of global justice, section 5 further defends the duty to de-reify by clarifying Honneth’s definition of reification as a ‘fictive’ or figurative form of forgetfulness. Section 6 concludes by exploring the limits of de-reification as a strategy for full empowerment of the global poor.

**2. Material deprivation as global misrecognition in Honneth’s substantive moral theory.**

An exploration of this theme should begin by acknowledging that Honneth’s engagement with questions of cosmopolitan justice has to date been cautious. As is well known, his full moral recognition theory (1995; 2003) takes individual struggles for recognition to occur within a form of life, normally a nation, composed of human beings who interact to reproduce social norms. Moreover, while he has begun to discuss how his recognition theory would apply to international relations (Honneth, 2012), his explorations of this issue seem to concentrate on nations as subjects of recognition, and, notably, on ‘soft power’ methods to increase respect for rights by securing the dignity and esteem of peoples. Therefore, although some writers (e.g. Schweiger, 2014) read into Honneth’s theory an absolute core of recognition to support social rights, Honneth’s preoccupation with interstate recognition seems to sidestep the concerns of cosmopolitan writers, who have focused mostly on obligations between individuals world-wide to secure basic resources to alleviate material need for all.

Despite Honneth’s seeming evasion of this form of cosmopolitan concern, his general conception of material inequalities as failures of recognition seems crucial. Specifically, within his longstanding debate with Nancy Fraser over redistribution and recognition (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), Honneth insists that material deprivation constitutes an injustice characterised not solely by economic need but by a violation of legitimate expectations of recognition. This conception emphasises Honneth’s critique of unrestrained capitalism and his proposal for welfare rights and market constraints to ensure equal opportunities to achieve ‘self-realization’, the ideal at the core of his moral theory of recognition (2003: 156).

Yet, even within particular nations, the implications of this idea for entrenched poverty may appear debatable. Also, the focus on the concept of self-realization may be thought not to respond convincingly to global economic injustices. One reason for this is that, as Seglow (2009) observes, the depth of poverty world-wide involves an elemental wrong which does not seem best expressed as a failure of people to ‘realize’ themselves. The idea suggests a self-regarding inwardness, which misses the point of why grinding poverty is unjust. Self-realization in Honneth’s sense seems to involve complex assumptions of civic respect and reciprocal expectations based on a shared distributive norms (2012: 164-165). Moreover, as Honneth recently traces the concept to nineteenth century European sociologists who locate the experimental identity-seeking involved in ‘realizing’ oneself as central to advanced, deregulated economies (2012: 165), self-realization appears a thick, culture-based concept, which appears incongruous on which to establish responsibilities between people located differently in the world economy. At least, Honneth takes self-realization in advanced democracies to involve the integration of citizens into the economy to enable self-aware, critical reflection (Arendshort, 2015: 142). Controversially perhaps, too, he allies the idea to a Western psychological notion that people should ‘be’ and ‘find’ themselves (2012: 165).

At the same time, however, it might seem problematic to deem the idea of self-realization irrelevant to global poverty eradication. But, while all human beings probably do have interests in the reflective endorsement of their lives which self-realization involves, the concern is that Honneth’s formulation of the concept seems to depend on complex desires for political participation and autonomy which may not be easily applied globally. We will return in conclusion to consider the potential role of self-realization. However, for now it suffices to say that Honneth’s hope for the progressive actualisation of human rights may seem controversial or counter-productive, if raised on the basis of self-realization alone, since the value presumes democratic conditions which seem not to obtain world-wide (Heins, 2008: 149).

In seeking to discover, therefore, how Honneth’s theory may be interpreted to intervene in the normative debate about global poverty, I shall bracket his focus on self-realization and focus instead on his more crucial conception of economic injustice as a deeper form of misrecognition. This form of misrecognition would be related ultimately to the denial of self-realization. However, it would refer more specifically to the denial of a basic human connectedness which seems prior to and more fundamental thana failure self-realization. If Honneth’s theory of recognition may be thus interpreted, the theory would seem preferable to more ‘technocratic’, resource-distributive solutions to global poverty. For, it would resonate with recent attempts in poverty studies to focus more clearly on the human relations that build agency beyond material goods (e.g. Deveaux, 2015). Although the deprivations of the impoverished are in a sense obviously bound up with gross deficiencies in material resources, the recent turn in recognition theory towards focusing on fractured human relations seems crucial. Therefore, it is to this issue precisely that the article turns in depth.

**3. Honneth’s more fundamental concept of misrecognition: a reified response to poverty as the atrophy of antecedent recognition.**

Honneth has elaborated on a layer of recognition more fundamental than his substantive moral concepts of love, rights and esteem, which seems highly relevant to a cosmopolitan challenge to global poverty. This section takes up the task of presenting his concepts of antecedent recognition and reification (2001; 2008a) as a more convincing theoretical intervention into the problem of global poverty than his more widely known writings on inter-state recognition.

To begin, Honneth essentially characterises antecedent recognition as the precondition of full moral interaction in terms of his substantive recognitive principles. He takes this primary form of recognition to involve the awareness between interaction partners that they are dealing with people rather than things. Rather than a sophisticated moral reaction, it is a ‘spontaneous, non-rational recognition of others as human beings’ (2008: 52). Drawing on Cavell’s social theory, developmental psychologists such as Winnicott, and philosophical defences of a sense of involved care for the world in the writings of Dewey and Heidegger, Honneth contends that a form of engaged responsiveness, which he presents as a species of recognition, is the natural starting-point for all human relations (2008: 37-39).

Hints of this idea have been apparent in Honneth’s writings over time. His initial examination of antecedent recognition seems to occur in an early essay on social invisibility (2001). This essay suggests how a very basic form of recognition may fail, in ways instanced by the discrimination affecting African Americans in the United States. However, Honneth’s more sophisticated elaboration of the concept occurs in a later essay (2008) which depicts the failures of this form of recognition through what he views as its opposite, namely a reconception of the Marxist idea of *reification.* This concept is applied not only to racism but also to specific cases such as the Holocaust. Briefly, Honneth takes antecedent recognition to connote a form of empathy, the breakdown of which results in an extreme objectifying standpoint of reification. Consistent with his earlier discussion, Honneth emphasises his departure from Georg Lukács’ presentation of reification as fundamentally a matter of capitalist exchange. Whereas Honneth accepts Lukács’ essential definition of reification as the ‘condition in which a relation between people takes on the character of a thing’ (1967 [1923]), he goes beyond Lukács’ focus on Marxist commodity fetishism and the suggestion that reification occurs within a specific economic narrative only. For Lukács, workers in a capitalist system were forced to sell their labour as a commodity to survive, in an exchange-relation which prevented revolutionary praxis. On this view, it is the specific economic system which produces the proletariat’s stance of ‘reified’, detached spectatorship of others and the world (Chari, 2010: 588). In contrast, as Honneth seeks to explain ideologies such as racism and sexism through this concept, he takes the source of reification to lie not always in alienated labour but in a potentially wider range of normative sources. The core of reification is not necessarily the economic system, but that reification is always, in Honneth’s evocative phrase, the ‘forgetfulness of recognition’ (2008a: 152).[[4]](#footnote-4)

This brief analysis so far suggests, I believe, that Honneth’s ideas of antecedent recognition and reification may be more readily applied to cosmopolitan justice than his substantive moral theory. According to this interpretation, antecedent recognition can be conceived as ultimately connected with human beings’ capacities for self-realization; but it is distinct, in the sense that it seems the precondition for this complex goal.

Even if accepting these definitions, however, we need to be more specific regarding the relationship of reification and antecedent recognition to global poverty. The question arises: would poverty constitute a moral wrong becauseit reifies the poor? Or would Honneth suggest that the social processes of reification impede the affluent’s perceptions of their obligation to assist? This article will argue that Honneth’s theory suggests the second interpretation. It is unlikely that, for Honneth, the affluent cause the reification of the global poor directly, as reification seems to be a social process rather than a situation brought about through the action of any person or group. It would also be implausible to interpret Honneth to hold that poverty is morally wrong simplyowing to attitudes that reify the global poor. Rather, for Honneth, the social process of reification leads to, and in a sense naturalizes and thus depoliticizes, widespread social inaction in the face of extreme suffering. Put differently, the inaction of the affluent as regards the very poor world-wide would express and reflect the fractured human relations involved in reification.

Of course, a full cosmopolitan theory would eventually have to address substantial controversies regarding the relationship between concerns for fellow nationals and the commitment to the distant needy. The controversies arising around these questions should not be underestimated both in popular attitudes and in normative theory (e.g. Miller, 1995; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2009). While space in this article does not permit the full exploration of these issues, my limited but still significant task is to establish the basic relevance of Honneth’s concepts of antecedent recognition and reification to cosmopolitan theory in an elementary sense.

Key support for this interpretation may be found in the transcultural nature of Honneth’s claim that the very possibility of rational thought must include antecedent recognition (Varga, 2010). Honneth implies that to think coherently, one must discern a distinction between oneself and other humans; one must be conscious of others as distinct mental and physical entities. Drawing from Habermas, moreover, he takes this premise further to emphasise that natural human behaviour essentially involves an attempt to understand the perspective of one’s interaction partner, or the standpoint of the ‘second person’ (2008a: 18). It is this attempt to understand the second person’s perspective which reification denies. Whereas, for Lukács, reification is not morally reproachable so much as a contradiction of fundamental social ontology, Honneth implies that it violates a minimal, transcultural morality (2008: 78), one which seems independent of any comprehensive doctrine or world-view. On this more moralised understanding of reification as a violation of antecedent recognition, the capacity to engage the perspective of the extremely poor seems vital. To defend antecedent recognition is to morally challenge the failure of many in the ‘developed’ world to appreciate the scale of global poverty and the tendency to react in conflicted ways to the knowledge they possess (Gabriel, 2016: 15).

As Lichtenburg (2004) suggests, when confronted with suffering on this scale it is not unusual to opt for one out of a range of least painful responses, namely forgetting, wilful blindness or self-deception. These tendencies could all be seen, in key part, as effects of the reification of others or a failure to think from their perspective. The implication from Honneth’s theory is that reificatory reactions are morally problematic because they deny transcultural antecedent recognition, a form of human recognition which should obtain irrespective of the particular social, economic, bureaucratic or political system (2008a: 109). Indeed, the moral reproach of this form of ‘forgetfulness’ emerges in Honneth’s references to the Holocaust (2008: 78). And while Honneth’s focus on this example might suggest his intention to apply his ideas within specific nation-states, other examples he includes, such as human trafficking, seem transnational and therefore to suggest application beyond the lifeworld of a particular state.

The cosmopolitan application of Honneth’s concepts may also be shown by going deeper still into his disagreement with Lukács. Honneth does accept the Marxist and Weberian idea that reification results in a tendency of people to hyper-rationalise, or to view their social interactions in cost-benefit terms at the expense of deeper emotional responses. However, while Lukács supported this idea by assuming the dominance of the sphere of market exchange over all dimensions of cultural life (Chari, 2010: 597), Honneth, as we have seen, not only resists the location of reification within any particular political, economic and bureaucratic system. More than this, he suggests that reification may originate in many spheres of life, within private spheres, in gendered and cultural attitudes, and in perspectives on ethnic groups and civic relations. In view of this diversity, he seeks a ‘comprehensive and differentiated analysis of the phenomenon of reification’ (2008: 78).

Honneth’s refusal to unify all sources of reification therefore implies no single historical narrative which would rule out its occurrence *across* different economic systems and life-worlds. On this view, the reificatory relationship between the affluent and the impoverished world-wide may be distinct from but conceptually similar to other ideologically-sustained forms of this process. All are unified by a hyper-detached response to suffering or discrimination. Although some writers (e.g. Chari, 2010: 595) challenge Honneth’s concept for lacking the economic logic of previous versions, it seems productive to insist that no group, even an unemancipated proletariat of late capitalism, has a monopoly over the experience of reification. There is no group that is so severely reified that their situation uniquely motivates challenges to the status quo (Honneth, 2008: 78; Jay, 2008: 9). The pluralism of Honneth’s concept, in brief, seems to support its potentially wide, cosmopolitan application.

This application would be timely given the clear existence of social processes and institutions in an era of global interconnectedness which produce labour conditions and environmental changes, to which many people do not respond with engaged attitudes as members of the ‘one world’ which Peter Singer (2009) has famously urged. Significantly, this global connectedness has been theorised by Iris Young (2004; 2006; 2011), in a ‘social connection’ approach which overlaps significantly with Honneth’s concept of reification, and which assists to clarify its implications for justice towards the extremely poor world-wide.

Specifically, Young suggests that, while we cannot always claim that the structural injustices arising from trading practices between North and South are caused directly by economically privileged people, it is reasonable to assume that people inevitably participate in processes that mutually affect them, and hence that they are undeniably connected. As individuals, our role as consumers and participants in a world order that benefits us foreseeably impacts the life-conditions of distant others. While Honneth does not theorise these transnational processes directly, significantly in her late work Young seems to refer to the idea of reification to explain why people often do not respond proactively to global injustices (Young, 2007; cited in Nussbaum, 2009). Although Young would possibly not accept Honneth’s full theory of antecedent recognition, it seems plausible to view her ‘social connection’ model of global justice as consistent with the core of Honneth’s key insights; and to suppose that attention to her theory assists to extend the implications of Honneth’s abstract theory of reification towards a theory of global justice.

At this point, however, one might be concerned about the dissimilarities between Young’s and Honneth’s perspectives on global justice. For one thing, Young holds that people distance themselves from the situation of the global poor precisely because they view large disparities of wealth as ‘structural’ and therefore not a matter of their own responsibility, a claim which Honneth does not make. However, while this is true for Young, she also insists on the moral critique of the inaction of the affluent when confronted by global disparities of wealth. Like Honneth, this moral critique does not follow from the individual being assumed to be the cause of global injustice, but in virtue of their undeniable social connection as a human being with the extremely poor. To this extent, Young’s ‘social connection’ model overlaps with Honneth’s moral critique of reification on the basis of violation of a core human bond. And Young’s particular emphasis on global justice can serve to highlight why, from Honneth’s perspective, it should be regarded as morally problematic that many, despite awareness of this human bond, view the global poor in distant, somewhat objective terms.[[5]](#footnote-5)

If this seems right, Young’s account would support Honneth’s moral critique of the de-sensitization that occurs under conditions of reification, including the sense of compassion fatigue and hopelessness that many relatively affluent people might feel as regards what seems a large and distant problem. Although there remain differences between Honneth’s and Young’s approaches,[[6]](#footnote-6) Young’s theory appears to deepen the cosmopolitan implications of Honneth’s by emphasising that the failure to acknowledge global interconnectedness is related to the dominance of a one-to-one model of causation and blame in the moral outlook of people in advanced industrialised states. People rationalise their disengagement on grounds that they cannot be held individually liable for causing the suffering of global injustice (2004: 371). While the question of responsibility for global injustice will be discussed specifically soon, the point raised for now is only that Young’s idea that a moral critique of inaction flows from an essential fact of human connectedness overlaps with, deepens and assists to extend the implications of Honneth’s depiction of reification. For they both seem to contest the disengagement which may in fact be linked to the almost continual exposure of people in developed states to media images which tend to provoke a ‘crisis of pity’ with respect to humanitarian aid (Boltanski, 1999).

Although the complex sociological and psychological process that lead to such responses cannot be discussed in this article fully, my contention so far may be summarised so far by emphasising that Honneth conceives reification as a mistake on the part of the relatively affluent, who tend to dissociate themselves morally from world-wide forms of suffering. For Honneth, this mistake may be partly understandable if not fully excusable. By referring to key aspects of Young’s ‘social connection’ theory of global justice, I have suggested a complementarity between the two approaches and that Young’s theory suggests the cosmopolitan application of Honneth’s ideas of antecedent recognition and reification. On this interpretation, Honneth’s theory draws our attention to the morally problematic disengagement of many today from what seems, from his perspective, a truer human form of praxis based on empathy (2008: 105).

**4. Global poverty: from the moral critique of forgetfulness to the duty to de-reify.**

If the initial interpretation of the cosmopolitan relevance of Honenth’s concepts seems convincing, I would like now to contend that they further suggest the need for critical thought and action about poverty alleviation through what will be called in this article ‘de-reification’. De-reification refers to the attempt to reassert one’s recognitional awareness of others’ essential humanity, by considering and encouraging the conditions of their agency. This reading of Honneth’s theory therefore suggests that the moral critique of reification may be extended to justify a moral duty to support the agency of the very poor.

To defend what might seem at first seem a rather extensive interpretation of Honneth’s abstract theory, it is worth establishing first why de-reification involves critical and imaginative thought about others’ lives. If reification is morally problematic for Honneth, there is an implied human need to overcome it as a mode of thought, and hence a need to think imaginatively from the perspective of the ‘second person’. For instance, rather than believe that the transfer of money alone could de-reify people who experience material hardship, forms of anti-poverty campaign might be considered which go significantly beyond existing policies. As reification suggests a blindness to the nature of others’ experiences, the attempt to reassert antecedent recognition could involve efforts to re-consider the terms and concepts through which poverty is assessed. One example of this expansion might be found in the reclamation of land by the property-less in Brazil. These campaigns have involved anti-poverty advocates in offering deeper challenges to notions of rights grounded in capitalist property relations (Deveaux, 2015; Chari, 2010).

Interpreting from Honneth’s theory a cosmopolitan duty to de-reify would of course extend his account beyond his actual statements. However it seems to keep faith with the moral impulse of his original essay. On this understanding, de-reification would also involve becoming conscious of what some critical writers on poverty refer to as the exclusions, limits and distortions of large-scale institutional responses to extreme deprivation. Saith (2005), for instance, alludes to the way in which certain international policies might, if unintentionally, decrease perceived need for more meaningful transformation of global relations. De-reification would thus involve becoming conscious of the need for such wider transformation. This is so despite the fact that at first it might seem incongruous to apply Honneth’s theory of reification to institutional policies. As his approach appears interactional, based on one-to-one human relations, it seems more aligned with Singer’s (2009) theory of individual duties for humanitarian aid than with Pogge’s (2002; 2005) institutional perspective on this issue.

However, to see why an absolute distinction between the actions and duties of individuals and institutions probably would not follow from Honneth’s theory, it is first worth observing that through his writings in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995), Honneth emphasises that the formation of individuals’ sense of personhood and agency arises through institutions, notably the family and the state. Moreover, to extend the theory to the global level, it is again useful to align Honneth’s theory of antecedent recognition with Young (2006)’s ‘social connection’ approach to global justice. As we saw earlier, Young takes up core issues concerning reification suggested by Honneth, and, significantly, she emphasises by way of a response to this reification that individuals are mutually implicated in institutions which influence and impact their life-chances. This awareness leads her to question distinctions between the actions and duties of individuals and institutions in bringing about global justice. Specifically, Young emphasises that it would be impossible for individuals entirely to renounce their participation in global institutions, because they benefit from their effects as consumers (2004: 373). Moreover, from her perspective, this intertwining suggests that relatively affluent individuals have normative responsibilities to contest the effects of global institutions that foreseeably sustain some in conditions of deep inequality in relation to others. It seems plausible that an analogous cosmopolitan moral duty, in the form of a duty of de-reification which involves urging for agency-sensitive global institutional policies towards the extremely poor, could be implied from Honneth’s moral critique of reification.

It should be observed, of course, that a key difference between Honneth’s and Young’s perspectives is that Young does not premise her argument on an essential emotional responsiveness as a key feature of human personhood, as found in Honneth’s theory of antecedent recognition. Instead, she begins from the premise that people in relatively affluent positions must if only counterfactually assume knowledge of others’ contributions to making their own agency possible (2004: 373). However, despite this divergence in starting-points, the two writers seem commonly to suggest that, that owing to a distinctive human bond, the moral critique of inaction results in a significant, if limited, responsibility, one which takes seriously the embeddedness of people within certain global structures and institutions. For Young, the responsibility arising from the moral critique of inaction involves minimally ‘acquir[ing] more specific knowledge about the effects of institutions’ (2004: 373). A similar duty may be thought to follow from Honneth’s theory. In this extended interpretation of his theory, the moral duty to overcome the forgefulness of others’ humanity would involve, at least, reflecting upon one’s everyday assumptions concerning one’s connections with near and distant others, and critical thought regarding restoring their agency.[[7]](#footnote-7)

If this further connection between Young’s and Honneth’s theories seems plausible, it is worth at this point making the discussion more concrete. In the remainder of this section, I shall suggest the relevance of the implied duty for de-reification to some critical discussions which have arisen in recent years concerning the recent Millennium Development Goals’ first objective for poverty eradication. Aiming to reduce the proportion of people suffering under the World Bank’s absolute poverty line, this target was in one sense indispensable and justly praised. However, some writers held that target-setting in relation to a complex human problem inevitably involves ‘simplification, reification and abstraction’ (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014:4). The concern was not merely that the goal seemed to engage a controversial definition of poverty which was restricted to purchasing power. Additionally, the unintended side-effect of success of increasing the purchasing power of the extremely poor may have been to deepen reification, by encouraging an over-confident public perception that global poverty had been comprehensively addressed (Saith, 2005).

The moral duty for de-reification, I suggest, encourages critical thought about such institutional definitions and effects of large-scale policies. It seems significant also, owing to the vigorous debate arising in development studies regarding whether reducing poverty to purchasing power responds to all dimensions of this condition, if, as Amartya Sen (1990) has long held, tackling extreme deprivation involves considering various human capabilities.[[8]](#footnote-8) The duty for de-reification could therefore be interpreted to involve, minimally, becoming aware of structural injustices which lead to different harms to persons’ capacities for agency. Of course, dependent on particular individual’s access to positions of influence and power, to follow Iris Young again (2004: 29), the duty may also involve organising with others to oppose structural injustices, or to encourage measures to promote the agency of the very poor, such as fuller partnership between emerging and advanced economies (Saith, 2005; Guther, 2010).[[9]](#footnote-9)

It is, of course, not straightforward to define specific individuals’ duties; and, following Young once again, it seems likely that the content of particular responsibilities may be limited by practical constraints, feasibility, time and the power and influence they each possess.[[10]](#footnote-10) With these provisos in mind, conceiving the moral duty to de-reify as a matter of thinking seriously about the *agency* of the very poor seems an important focus for de-reification. As Charles Taylor crucially contends (1985), central to human agency is the ability to discriminate between ends and motives, or to have a ‘(second-order) desire about a (first-order) desire’. Based on this interpretation, the duty to de-reify the very poor could be taken involve urging for policies which secure different psychological and material goods necessary to enable humans to make choices beyond mere physical survival, to secure therefore the capacity of people to have, in Taylor’s language, ‘desires about their desires’. Although an exhaustive, universal account of agency-conditions would be unrealistic to provide, they minimally seem to involve a certain level of education, literacy and social opportunity (Cudd, 2014). Rather than donation or food aid alone, more nuanced policies would be implied from Honneth’s ideal of attending to the ‘second person’s perspective.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The risk of this seemingly extensive interpretation of Honneth’s theory is that ordinary citizens would feel overwhelmed by a requirement to attend constantly to the dire realities of distress in the world, which are multi-faceted and complex. However, while it would take at the very least a further paper to examine the extent of the obligations of specific people[[12]](#footnote-12), it seems not too demanding to infer that the duty involves that human beings minimally recognising fellow humans as agents in their own right. Global reification is risked where rational people, through the institutions they participate in and support,[[13]](#footnote-13) fail to acknowledge the core human recognition owed to all across nations. In these situations, Honneth’s theory would imply the forgetfulness of recognition, and, flowing from this, a limited but significant duty for de-reification.

The risks of failing to respond critically to restore human agency in this sense are emphasised by Hayden’s (2007) compelling observation of the fact that nearly half of the world’s population lives on less than a dollar a day, a daily destruction of dignity through radical inequality which has caused unprecedented suffering. Hayden’s analysis may be considered along with Pogge’s (2005) moving characterisation of global poverty as a crime against humanity, to suggest that the individual’s first, and arguably manageable, duty to de-reify would at least involve becoming conscious of the effects of this radical inequality. Significantly, Hayden links the failure to react, and the psychological path away from sympathy and solidarity, with the instrumental rationality and bureaucratic drive which divests people of moral responsibility in late modernity(2007: 28).

**5. The realism of the duty to de-reify: figurative forgetfulness in the case of global poverty.**

The problematic issue that persists through the discussion so far seems to be the psychological plausibility of the duty to de-reify which has been interpreted from Honneth’s theory in the context of extreme but distant suffering. Hence, to establish more carefully how such duties do not seem to rest on an unrealistic account of human psychology, it is useful to raise two issues in connection with Honneth’s more detailed characterisation of antecedent recognition and reification. The first issue concerns the source of the moral critique of reification across national borders. This issue depends on showing that the theory of human nature assumed by antecedent recognition is not too ambitious, and in this sense that it may be transculturally or transnationally applied. The second is to explain why the duty to de-reify and to restore the agency of the poor would be psychologically plausible, in the sense of not stretching the moral imagination of ordinary people unrealistically. I shall suggest that the duty interpreted from Honneth’s theory is both transculturally applicable and psychologically conceivable, if, in the case of global poverty, it relates to a *figurative* form of forgetfulness.

To address the first issue, consider the concern that Honneth’s concepts presuppose a much thicker conception of human nature than he acknowledges. This is an important challenge, because, if true, it would reduce the likelihood of reading from his theory cosmopolitan duties applicable across different economic systems and cultures. Honneth seems convinced that antecedent recognition is a culturally neutral, and indeed purely conceptual, idea, as we have seen. Yet the concern is that, if it is so minimal, it risks lacking the normative content needed to contest the moral wrong of reification. In response to this dilemma, I have suggested that antecedent recognition is grounded in the ethical need to secure the conditions of agency from which people may move towards self-realization. As the theory of human nature refers to agency *for* self-realization, it would be culturally neutral. However, it would be sufficiently moralised to ground a cosmopolitan duty to resist reification in responding to global poverty.

Some writers remain sceptical of this possibility, however. Geuss, Butler and Lear (2008) accuse Honneth of relying on a controversial conception of human nature as a matter of fundamental empathy. They believe this conception to rest on a conception of human nature that not all would endorse, and hence which cannot be easily be ‘proven’ or universalized. Moreover, Sayers (2009: 476) voices concern that Honneth presents a bewildering range of examples of reification, from sporting rivalries to human trafficking. These examples, he argues, are not easily viewed as equally serious moral injuries according to any conception of the essential nature of human life.

Honneth responds to these concerns by clarifying that reification would be extreme (2008a: 184), occurring at the ‘zero point of sociality’, as exemplified by the dire case of the Holocaust. Despite this clarification, Sayers (2009) and Lear (2008) further point out that Honneth’s assumptions concerning reification as a breakdown of universal empathy must be seen as too optimistic and utopian, if it is true that negative emotions are equally relevant to human nature. Why should empathy be assumed as the natural starting-point for all human relations, if anger, for example, might also be a natural form of recognition (Butler, 2008)? These objections suggest that it is not that those who commit severe violations such as the Holocaust were failing to recognise their victims in a fundamental or existential sense. Rather, they recognise them as an existential threat, which is a form of acknowledgement too (2008: 103). Butler more generally accuses Honneth of employing an ‘Arcadian myth’, according to which reification is deemed a Biblical fall from grace, whereas, in her view, human nature is in reality more complex and ambivalent. If she is correct, the affluent’s failure to resist reifying the global poor might be understood even in terms of a libertarian commitment to self-ownership, which would entail no problematic denial of human nature and connectedness.

We can understand a potential response by Honneth to these issues by drawing, I believe, on his long held opposition to a Hobbesian understanding of human nature, as developed through *The Struggle for Recognition*. The failure of antecedent recognition, on this understanding, involves a socially pervasive atrophy of basic self-other reciprocity. Given that Honneth recurrently assumes that realizing one’s humanity involves a capacity to acknowledge the legitimate expectations of one’s interaction partners, the rationale for counting reification as a deep moral injury would rest on a conception of human nature which requires a minimal empathy for the other’s conditions of agency, which, in this article’s example, entrenched poverty seems to deny. As Honneth concedes in his response to his critics, moreover, anger may of course be a form of recognition; but antecedent recognition is the precondition even for negative emotions (2008a: 152). Anger is a substantive reaction which is consistent with recognising the other’s personhood and agency.

On this basis, it seems plausible to say that Honneth’s theory of humanity is not overly ambitious or utopian, and that as such it may be defensible in a cosmopolitan theory. Moreover, the duty for de-reification read earlier from his theory seems psychologically conceivable, owing to the figurative form of forgetfulness which he suggests in reply to his critics.[[14]](#footnote-14) At this stage, Honneth clarifies that reification would involve literal forgetfulness in only in a small category of very serious cases*.* While he takes a key example of the serious variety to arise in the Holocaust, ‘when one truly loses the feeling that the other is a living being with human properties’ (2008a: 157), cases of fictive or figurative reification arise more commonly in human life. These cases ‘are part and parcel of some of the more intensified forms of human conduct’, in which people remain ‘aware of the ontological difference between people and things’ (2008a: 157). Although the issue then arises as to whether Honneth’s study of reification is intended only as an account of the extreme, dramatic violations such as the Holocaust, it would seem that his concession to the frequency of fictive forms of reification suggests the psychological possibility, at least in these cases, of restoring antecedent recognition and opposing the forgetfulness that this form of reification involves. Because in these instances human beings retain at least a minimal consciousness of a relationship of reciprocity, and because others are not literally reduced to things but are treated *as if* they were things or *as if* they were not fully human, there is a possibility of redeeming the situation. This kind of case would seem to arise in contrast with the extreme scenarios where the humanity of others appears literally cast aside and forgotten.

It might, of course, be morally desirable or conceptually possible also to challenge reification in the cases of more serious, literal forgetfulness. However, in these examples the relationship of recognition, as in the perpetration of genocide, seems more firmly obliterated or lost from human consciousness. If the reificatory relationship between the affluent and impoverished is *fictive* in the case we are considering, and if for many individuals the wilful blindness and rationalizations for inaction occur *in the context, however suppressed,* of underlying sensitivity to what is understood as a clearly serious issue, a duty for de-reification seems psychologically attainable and plausible. This would be despite the objection that, where we find fictive reification in the real world, the forgetfulness of the other is often normalised to the point that contesting rationalizations for one’s inaction seems almost inconceivable. That is, when reification becomes deeply habitual, the failure to consider others’ agency seems a fact about the world, rather than perceived as a violation or as exceptional. In the response to this objection, however, we might say that, in fictive forgetfulness, where people engage in special pleading in the context of an underlying awareness of a grave moral wrong, it is likely that there will remain some reasonable means and rational arguments which would assist to overcome the persistent act of forgetting.

The deeper concern with the defence of overcoming the forgetfulness of reification is that literal reification is likely to be more common than Honneth suggests. To illustrate, consider Kevin Bales’ (2012) unsettling exposition of the millions of ‘disposable’ people within the global economy, whose precarious and insecure existence may not even be documented in official poverty statistics and studies. Bales implies that the world literallyde-recognises them as human beings on account of their transient and unremunerated labour. Considering the pervasiveness and sheer numbers of people caught in these new forms of slavery, it would be difficult to view this de-recognition of humanity as dramatic or exceptional. If the perceived disposability of so many lives seems to involve the literal forgetfulness on the part of the comfortable and the affluent, a realistic duty for de-reification seems difficult to ground. Such deep forgetfulness implies that a sense of self-other reciprocity has been comprehensively obliterated or lost.

On closer examination of the situations Bales describes, however, these cases may not escape Young’s (2006) observation that the affluent must and do remain aware that issues in global labour justice presuppose interconnections between people through institutions and markets. Thus, even in the context of extreme denials of humanity such as these, the forgetfulness of the affluent could be construed as figurative. As Young argues, when a relatively affluent person purchases of a pair of shoes, they typically remain aware that their action presupposes the actions of all other people involved, including in sweatshops on the other side of world, in the process that transforms raw materials into clothes (2004: 373). Despite the imperfect knowledge that many might possess regarding sweatshop labour conditions, it is unlikely that human beings may fully deny knowledge of this form of labour. Similarly, it is unclear they may deny knowledge of at least some forms of modern slavery, even without detailed knowledge of those who work in the brick kilns of Pakistan and the brothels of Thailand (Bales, 2012). If, in all such cases, the forgetfulness of humanity seems not literal. It seems psychologically conceivable to encourage people to question the structures which sustain these forms of transient and precarious labour.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Despite this discussion, some writers remain concerned about Honneth’s wider reticence to theorise social processes of global capitalism (Kohn, 2008: 312). However, his cautious optimism with respect to progressive political change seems advantageous in the wide debate about global poverty. And his hope for possibilities to overcome reification also seems borne out by his disagreement with Lukács’ concept for what he views as its ‘overly totalizing ramifications’ (2008a: 125). For Lukács, reification would cause people entirely to lose their capacities for empathy, an outcome Honneth views as ultimately implausible. Antecedent recognition is more fundamental even than the struggle over rights, for Honneth, and takes the form of a minimal understanding oneself as part of the wider world (Varga, 2010: 24). Therefore, in response to charges of cultural bias or political naiveté, Honneth insists that antecedent recognition does not imply positive endorsement of all conduct, but only a sense of human engagement which is the condition for all sympathy and solidarity. Even in the cases of the new forms of slavery depicted by Bales, Honneth could be interpreted to hold that the possibility of eventual de-reification even in these cases should not be ruled out. The forgetfulness of recognition in these contexts seems to involve a kind of amnesia rather than a complete loss of consciousness of human engagement. People, thus, retain at least sub-conscious awareness of the other’s humanity which reificatory ideologies attempt to negate. Significantly, Honneth clarifies that the forgetfulness he refers to does not involve ‘unlearning’, because ‘*it cannot be true that our consciousness is dispossessed of this fact of recognition*’ (2008a: 150, my emphasis). If this is so, his theory retains, especially in the case of fictive reification, hope of contesting even seemingly extreme de-recognitions of humanity.

This interpretation of Honneth’s theory seems crucially to turn on taking recognition to involve restoring conditions of agency suggested earlier in this chapter. Such an approach seems consistent with cosmopolitan writers such as Ann Cudd (2014: 206), who defend projects akin to the duty to restore agency to the very poor as we have interpreted from Honneth’s theory. Using the term ‘normative agency’, Cudd contends that, whereas development assistance has often taken forms such as disaster relief aid, the risk is that reliance on private philanthropic donations may be motivated mostly by the contribution that donation makes to the donor’s subjective feelings of self-worth. Consistent with this article’s interpretation of Honneth’s theory, and especially with the previous section’s exploration of the duty to de-reify, for Cudd the recognition of the normative agency of the distant needy involves a more complex process than one involving resource redistribution alone. Hence she urges more focus on the fuller agency-conditions of the very poor, to enable them to conceive and act on a sense of destiny they regard as valuable (2014: 206).

Even considering the psychological plausibility of the duty to de-reify as explored in this section, we therefore reach the crucial limitation on the potential of de-reification to address structural inequalities which retain people in cycles of poverty. For, we have seen that de-reification relates only to recovering one’s awareness of the humanity of the global poor and the willingness critically to pursue, as best one is able, restoring others to the conditions of agency. It does not refer to full emancipation, empowerment or what Honneth refers to as ‘self-realization’.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is, therefore, this crucial limitation on the application of Honneth’s concepts in the case of global poverty to which we turn next, in the concluding section of this article.

**6. Empowerment and self-realization: the limits of a reification-based response to global poverty.**

If this article has been persuasive, de-reification is likely to be significant for poverty alleviation at the elemental level. However, it cannot be relied upon to fulfil the whole task, which is also likely to involve supporting the struggles by the extremely poor for negotiations of their fundamental interests in self-realization. I therefore turn in conclusion to a point introduced in the opening section, namely that fully supporting the route of those in poverty to self-realization may involve a complex struggle over the different aspects of empowerment. Fully understanding and supporting this process would involve engaging the person’s life-world in depth, in a further stage of sustainable poverty alleviation which would be, I suggest, difficult to justify within Honneth’s framework.

In this final section, I therefore briefly describe how the full understanding of emancipation from poverty would probably transcend the focus on the conditions of agency to which de-reification relates.[[17]](#footnote-17) Ensuring that people sustainably exit the ‘trap’ or ‘spiral’ which poverty often presents would depend on attempting to understand the lifeworld of specific people, as they struggle for self-realization according to their conception of the good life, or their sense of what is valuable and worthy to pursue. This struggle for empowerment through self-realization could only occur after de-reification, because when one is grossly malnutritioned and destitute, existing below the level of bare agency, the idea of struggling to ‘realize’ a ‘conception of the good’ seems an unrealistic prospect from a human point of view.

If this point seems plausible, it is worth observing the complexity of the empowerment of real people towards self-realization by considering Khader’s (2014) examination of the gendered contradictions of some forms of locally-sensitive development assistance. Focusing on micro-credit loans for women in rural South Asia, Khader argues that while it is clear that these initiatives have in many ways been extremely productive, the data over the last decades on their effects indicate gendered contradictions in experiences of empowerment, even once economic agency is enhanced (2014: 233; Alkire, 2007: 10-11).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Khader observes, more specifically, that although programmes of micro-credit often provide women with the conditions of economic survival and agency, in their own cultural lifeworld the question of patriarchy, so central to empowerment or sustained departure from the poverty spiral, does not seem necessarily to decrease. One reason is that, at times, the receipt of loans used for home-working industries correspondingly decreases women’s reasons to participate on a par with men in the labour market, which then reduces their subjective reasons for challenging patriarchal behaviour (Khader, 2014: 233). A form of paradoxical gender self-subordination often ensues, highlighting the complexity of a full understanding of another’s perspective on the different aspects of empowerment, understood in Honneth’s terms as self-realization according to love, rights and esteem. As Khader further notes (citing Poster and Salime, 2002; Narayan, 2005), while the popular media have nearly univocally praised microcredit, deep controversies in development studies indicate that, although these loans increase women’s decision-making within a certain sphere, by enhancing self-worth through increasing public dignity, they may also lead to deeper internalizations of gendered cultural norms in the private sphere, such as seclusion within the home. Moreover, whilst for some women micro-credit seems to increase domestic power and influence in household bargaining, the women reaping these benefits tend to be from economically better-off social strata (Khader, 2014; Kabeer, 1998). In contrast, the symbolic equation of ‘women as property’ may deepen for women in other economic positions.

While it is likely that these conflicts between different aspects of empowerment would arise in any social context, including in advanced economies, the dilemma of evaluating the empowerment of others becomes particularly challenging from a cosmopolitan point of view. This is due to the need to appreciate how within a culturally distinct form of life people achieve substantive routes towards sustainable self-realization. This point finally alludes to the real difficulties of applying Honneth’s theory of self-realization in a cosmopolitan theory. For, in the cases described by Khader and Kabeer, it seems ambiguous whether the increase in economic freedom and agency protected particular women in a sustained way from the physical and psychological insecurity needed for the durable route out of poverty. Expressed in terms of Honneth’s theory, the increase in economic and social rights might seem to correlate with decreased social esteem. Whether particular women gain overall with respect to sustainable self-realization remains unclear, due to the culture-specificity of the meaning and connotations of the term self-realization in their cultural form of life.

There are, therefore, complex questions confronting a full cosmopolitan approach to poverty alleviation as regards which practices and life-conditions are likely to empower and emancipate. It is not that the pursuit of self-realization conflicts with the deep aims of Honneth’s substantive moral theory. However, given his own concerns about cosmopolitanism, it is likely that he would remain cautious about the imperialism potentially involved in superimposing one’s own values and priorities on the life-worlds of others (Heins, 2008). Honneth’s perceptions of the risks of cosmopolitanism therefore suggests a crucial limit to the potential of his substantive moral theory to theorise poverty eradication globally.

Before closing, however, one might ask why one would not view the cases described by Kabeer and Khader as involving the denial of agency that often occurs in reification, rather than as a complex struggle over self-realization. Honneth is conscious that people may be reified in different ways, both in economic and gender terms, as we have seen. Yet while this seems true, his account of reification refers, as I have aimed to suggest in this article, to severe objectification as a moral injury, for instance where norms impede essential agency, as described earlier, perhaps through extreme psychological and physical violence or where others fail to react to deep deprivations of material need. In contrast, it is arguable whether the gender disparities deepened through microcredit refer to these basic denials of humanity. Rather, the dilemmas seem to refer to the women’s cultural struggle for emancipation and self-realization based on a conception of the good life, from their point of view.

In summary, it seems less straightforward to apply Honneth’s moral recognition theory to the fuller task of sustainable empowerment for poverty eradication, than to pursue de-reification to secure elemental human agency in the context of severe deprivation. This is not to say that *also* pursuing full self-realization is not also essential in a cosmopolitan theory which is concerned with the *sustainable* departure of people from the poverty cycle. However, it is to say that the conceptual tools for this task are harder to locate within Honneth’s theory.[[19]](#footnote-19) Therefore, the wider question left open by this article’s discussion concerns how de-reification would combine with a dialogue through which the structurally dominated and extremely poor could fully reclaim their sense of public respect and social esteem. Minimally, Honneth’s concepts of reification and antecedent recognition suggest an elemental duty, based on a visceral awareness of human connectedness, to redeem the claims of distant others. It is to recall the aspiration to recover the second person’s standpoint that seems the most compelling foundation of the recognition-based approach to global poverty.

**7. Conclusion.**

This article has aimed to demonstrate that cosmopolitan duties in relation to the dire condition of poverty world-wide may be supported through Axel Honneth’s recognition theory. I have suggested that his substantive moral forms of recognition do not, however, easily support a duty to respond to the urgent claims of the extremely poor. In view of the difficulties of locating global consensus on Honneth’s ideal of self-realization, I turned to the layer of recognition he regards as fundamental, namely an essential concept of antecedent recognition. The concept’s minimalism provided a shareable ground from which to respond to prevailing tendencies in the world to forget the humanity of the extremely poor through social processes of reification.

As it was argued that Honneth’s account of the forgetfulness of recognition is limited to restoring suffering subjects to the conditions of basic agency through the moral duty for de-reification on the part of the relatively affluent, it seemed ultimately that this argument leaves under-explored more complex layers of fuller, sustained poverty alleviation. Despite this limitation, Honneth’s evocative account of the forms of forgetfulness relevant to this issue provides a compelling grounding for more familiar cosmopolitan theories. His critical approach to reification justifies, at least, a duty to interrogate widespread failures seriously to act upon the urgency of problems of deprivation. It encourages us continually to battle against this passivity, attempting, time and again, to respond to the humanity of others.

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1. I am especially grateful to Andrea Baumeister, Rowan Cruft, Nicholas Smith and Shane O’Neill for their careful and engaged feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to express gratitude to two anonymous referees for *Social Theory and Practice* for their perceptive comments and constructive advice. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the now extensive literature on cosmopolitan political theory, insightful studies of poverty as inhuman and as involving a lack of ability to perform a range of characteristically human activities include Lotter (2011) and Metz (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To be sure, the global justice literature tends to view responsibilities as flowing exclusively from affluent nations to developing ones. But in reality, entrenched poverty obviously cuts across North and South, developed and underdeveloped contexts. Therefore, although this article refers to relations between people of ‘relatively affluent’ countries and the ‘the global poor’, these terms are used for broad theoretical purposes and with an awareness of the complex issues raised by poverty today. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The reference to forgetfulness evokes Adorno’s reflection that ‘all reification is a forgetting: objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us, without their continual presence of their other aspects. When something of them has been forgotten’ (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999; 321). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course, the complexity of the issues should be recognised. The reluctance of people in relatively affluent societies to intervene in this problem arises from a mixture of motives, some of which concern the perceived magnitude of the issue, and others have to do with the feelings of hopelessness that such a situation evokes. The sheer number of people suffering extreme poverty makes the pool of people requiring assistance seem overwhelming (Gabriel, 2016: 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the following section I suggest one particular difference in emphasis between Young’s and Honneth’s arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This reading of the mutual dependence between individuals and institutions in Honneth’s theory seems, moreover, supported by one of Honneth’s key examples, namely human trafficking, which seems dependent on complex transnational practices and institutions broadly conceived. The duty to de-reify those affected by this practice would most realistically perhaps first involve informing oneself of how and whether international institutions are effectively addressing the root causes of this form of trafficking. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The key target of the first Millennium Development Goal was to halve extreme poverty and hunger rates by the end of 2015. The goal regarding extreme hunger was largely met by 2010, although it seems that this outcome included considerable regional variations. While South Asia succeeded in meeting this target, this was not true for Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance. Moreover, the first MDG defined extreme poverty through three indicators: 1. The percentage of people living on less than $1.25 a day; 2. The number of people who live beneath the minimum income level deemed necessary to meet basic needs; and 3. The share of national food consumption by the 20% of the poorest population. It is likely that these definitions are ambiguous at the level of defining ‘basic needs’ and in respect of focusing heavily on income or purchasing power. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It seems that global partnership, while listed within the development goals, was not necessarily viewed as an integral aspect of poverty eradication. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A core issue was also the MDGs’ focus on the goal of reducing ‘by half the *proportion* of people who suffer from hunger’, seemed to leave out of the picture the absolute number of peopleliving in poverty (Guther, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. One might at this stage ask whether Honneth’s theory implies only a negative duty (suggesting a duty not to harm); or whether the duty would be positive (suggesting the need for concrete action for poverty-alleviation). There is now a concerted debate concerning this issue in relation to Pogge’s theory (see, for instance, Cruft, 2005; Gilabert, 2005). It may be, however, that too much focus on the philosophical label for these duties would obscure the real issues. Often doing no harm does imply or involve efforts to rectify or supplement existing policies. Despite this point, the debate about the nature of cosmopolitan duties remains significant, albeit one which would require more space than is available in this article of this length. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Young distinguishes individuals’ political responsibilities with respect to global labour justice in terms of their relative power and privilege. Honneth could be interpreted as not opposed to this idea; but that his concrete theory of reification does not provide sufficient clues to develop this argument fully. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. There is of course a difference between the institutions that one simply accepts and those one actively supports. The minimal point raised here is that Honneth’s theory, in this sense akin to Pogge’s, seems to suggest that the failure critically to contest institutions amounts to sustaining reification, which is morally problematic. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It is realistic to believe that effective action following from the duty for de-reification would involve collective rather than individual action. Collective action may be most effective through institutions, such as schools or through campaigns of governmental and non-governmental organisations. However it is still plausible, I believe, that individuals have singular duties to become aware of processes of reification with respect to the condition of the global poor. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for *Social Theory and Practice* for raising this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In fact, Bales (2012) seems to retain hope of overcoming some of these forms of modern slavery in *Disposable People* by calling on researchers to follow the flow of raw materials and products from slave to marketplace in order effectively to target and ‘name and shame’ the corporations that perpetuate these forms of labour. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Precisely where the distinction lies between agency, on the one hand, and on the other empowerment through self-realization is a contestable matter. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a full response to this question. However, this distinction does seem to me relevant and important to consider in debates about poverty alleviation. I develop this point further below in the section on empowerment and micro-credit programmes. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for *Social Theory and Practice* for raising a query about this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. By way of further explanation, I concede that specifying the conditions for ‘agency’ is often likely to be a contested terrain. However, my contention in this article is that these conditions would almost certainly be much less controversial than ascertaining the conditions for self-realization and empowerment across different cultures and ‘life-worlds’. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Although Khader uses the terms ‘agency’ and ‘empowerment’ interchangeably, I use the latter concept to connote a more advanced level at which people act to secure their moral and political interests. I recognise that part of the dilemma over the de-reification of the global poor might be to know precisely where the crucial line between agency and empowerment should be drawn. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for the journal for making this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)