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Reenvisioning Freedom: Human Agency in Times of Ecological Disaster

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I address the question of human agency from the perspective of critical social theory. Critical social theories seek to change social reality for the better in an ethical-political sense based on a critique of what is wrong with the existing one. Furthermore, they offer a perspective on changing social reality for the better that is attentive to historical, social, and geopolitical contexts. I start from the premise that the salient context today is anthropogenic ecological disaster on a global scale. I assume, furthermore, that *radical* changes are needed in order to arrest our current disastrous trajectory and, in the best case, redirect it. However, as things stand, human agents seem unable to bring about the radical changes that are required. As a first step toward remedying this, I postulate the need for a fundamental transformation of ethical perceptions, on both individual and collective levels: If humans globally are to grasp how the dominant modes of thinking and acting are ecologically disastrous, there has to be a radical shift in their ideas about the ethically good life.[1] Although the requisite shift in ethical perceptions will not, on its own, suffice for radical social change, I see it as its precondition. This leads me to propose a reimagined, rearticulated conception of human freedom as ecologically attuned, self-directing, self-transforming political agency.

For a number of years I have been concerned to reimagine and rearticulate the concept of freedom as a mode of ethically self-determining human agency in a democratic political context. In these reflections, my focus has been on self-directing agency as a distinctive form of *social* freedom, in the general sense of a mode of agency dependent on human relations within society. Recently, however, I have come to realize that this perspective is inadequate. It is insufficiently attuned to the multiple and complex relational contexts, nonhuman as well as human, in which humans exercise their agency.

The thesis driving my current endeavor is that the contemporary ecological disaster calls for a fundamental reconceptualization of human freedom as it has been understood by modern Western political thinking and embodied in everyday thought, behavior, and social practices. I offer a utopian vision of human agency, and the terms in which to articulate it, that would motivate a fundamental reorientation of thinking, behavior, and social practices globally. On a general level, I seek to show the importance at certain times in history of radical reimagining what it means to lead an ethically good life, and the need for new ethical-political vocabularies to accompany such reimaginings (Lear, 2008).

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My specific aim is to create a new field of possibilities amidst the dire circumstances of ecological disaster in a context where it may seem impossible even to imagine what these might be.

I use the term "utopian" advisedly, in order to stress that I do not propose an alternative account of freedom that is normative in a prescriptive sense; rather I issue an invitation to reimagine a particular conception of human agency that became dominant within capitalist modernity. However, my proposal is not abstractly idealistic: it has a basis in actual and historical impulses and aspirations, both within Western capitalist cultures and in religious and cultural thinking and practices elsewhere.[2]

In recent times, the term "The Anthropocene" has gained widespread currency in popular and academic discourse to describe the anthropogenic aspect of the contemporary environmental disaster. It is now widely used as a name for a new epoch of human evolution characterized by human-induced change to the biosphere and to convey the unprecedented rapidity and unparalleled capacity of humans to destroy the ecosystems on which their survival depends. Despite disputes among geologists concerning the degree to which the present period can be identified as the successor epoch to the Holocene, there is overwhelming scientific agreement that rapid anthropogenic climate change and loss of biodiversity constitute grave threats to the future of the human species; indeed, there is widespread scientific agreement that human activity, amplified by the rapid development of capitalist industrialization and the unchecked pursuit of affluence, has unleashed uncontrollable natural forces that leave contemporary humans as vulnerable to the devastating power of nature as their earliest ancestors. There are good reasons to think that the predominant conceptions of human agency, particularly within contemporary Western cultures, have facilitated this anthropogenic environmental devastation. Here I connect with recent thinking in Earth System Science, where conceptions of human agency have come to be seen as part of a larger interconnected biosphere: scientists, recognizing conceptions of human agency as a significant factor in anthropogenic climate change and loss of biodiversity, now invite scholars and researchers from the humanities and social sciences to help them address the challenges of ecological disaster (Thomas et al, 2020). Following this line of thought, technological advances, even revolutionary breakthroughs in geoengineering and CO_2 removal, will be insufficient to halt our current perilous trajectory and redirect it for the better. Technological advances will need to be accompanied by a new perspective on human agency, at an individual and collective level.

Since it was first coined (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000), the use of the "Anthropocene" concept to characterize the contemporary global ecological situation has attracted criticism in the humanities and social sciences, particularly among theorists concerned with radical social transformation (Bonneuil, 2015; Haraway, 2015; Hornborg, 2019; Malm, 2018a; Moore, 2016; Stengers, 2015). Their criticisms are directed primarily at implicit assumptions about human nature and sociopolitical relations characteristic of some prominent interpretations of the concept. The main objections are that the concept of the Anthropocene naturalizes, depoliticizes, and conceals. It *naturalizes* the ecological disaster by rendering it a natural outcome of the sort of species that humans are. It *depoliticizes* by flattening social, political, and economic relations, grouping together all humans under one umbrella, implying that no particular group of humans is to blame. It depoliticizes further due to its implicit message that little can be done to avert disaster. It *conceals* factors important for understanding the ecological crisis such as economic inequalities, cultural asymmetries, colonialism, mass media, and social media, thereby distracting from their role in the crisis and hindering reflection on how to address them and the ecological iniquities with which they are intimately connected. Critically engaged theorists who take this stance toward the concept of the Anthropocene propose alternative framing concepts, by means of which they attempt to reveal and capture the central components it neglects or obscures. Influential alternative proposals include *Capitalocene*, *Plantationcene*, and *Urbanocene*. I view these not as rival concepts but as narratives driven by shared concerns. I take seriously the dangers to which critics draw attention, while nonetheless insisting that ecological devastation is the larger context within which challenges such as capitalism, colonialism, and urban expansion must be addressed.

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1 | Freedom as ecologically attuned ethical human agency

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a grim reminder of the hubristic attitude expressed in the modern ideal of freedom. Despite enormous scientific achievements that led to the production of new vaccines in a remarkably short time, the pandemic shook confidence in the view that technological ingenuity can master nature and finally put an end to virulent disease. The increasing frequency and violence of flash floods, wildfires, and heat waves has further contributed to a growing perception of human vulnerabilities to natural forces. However, the new humility is ambivalent. On the positive side, it offers the prospect of a fundamental change in thinking about human agency in its relations to self and others, human and other-than-human. On the negative side, it is frequently coupled with feelings of human powerlessness that are expressed in blustering defiance (libertarianism), violence (eco-terrorism), or resignation. Such responses leave untouched the patterns of thought and behavior that have led to ecological devastation. This is one reason not to jettison the concept of freedom entirely but rather to seek to reimagine and rearticulate it. For, lacking a sense that self-determining agency is possible, humans are all too likely to vacillate between regressive feelings of human powerlessness and the delusional belief in human supremacy.

There is a further reason why I consider it important to retain the idea of freedom, despite its troubling history within capitalist modernity. I hold that the concept of freedom, if reimagined and rearticulated in the right way, is indispensable for socially transformative agency of the right kind. In my utopian projection, this means ecologically attuned, self-determining, and self-transforming agency.[3] Moreover, as social change for the better is a never-ending process, I see freedom not only as necessary in order to *achieve* a better society on a once-off basis but as an indispensable element of *any* good society.

Nonetheless, following Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, my starting position is that within capitalist modernity, the dominant ideal of freedom has been based on a view of human agency that expresses an attitude of mastery and control (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002).[4] In this book, published in the 1940s, the authors make clear how the view of agency dominant within capitalist modernity reduces both human and other-than-human nature to inanimate matter to be mastered and manipulated by humans at will. Whether it is understood negatively (as freedom from external interference) or positively (as self-determination or self-legislation), the dominant modern ideal of freedom celebrates human sovereignty, specifically the possession and exercise of a will that chooses and determines as it pleases, subject only to certain general moral and legal constraints. Intimately connected with a belief in the limitless potential of human agency, this ideal has assumed a plenitude of inexhaustible resources enabling an ever-expanding range of human choices, self-gratifying consumption, and uninhibited self-expression. For this reason, I seek to develop an alternative conception of human freedom that decisively breaks with the ideal of human sovereignty and the valorization of subjective choice and decision to which it is closely tied.

In earlier work, as previously mentioned, I sought to elaborate a conception of freedom as a mode of self-determining agency that develops within social relationships and is internally connected with a critically reflective concern for the good. This integral ethical component distinguished my conception from most other versions of social freedom.[5] At the same time, alert to the risk of suppressing the plurality of perspectives on the good and attendant danger of ethical authoritarianism, in my earlier writings I insisted that the meaning of the good is an open-ended question: a matter to be worked out contextually by human agents in agonistic processes, in which competing conceptions of the good life are opened to vibrant critique. In my current endeavor, I continue to conceptualize freedom as internally related to a concern for the good. As before, I take the view that the meaning of the good is an open question in principle for social and political theory. However, I now adopt the stance of an *engaged* critical social theorist and issue an invitation to imagine the good in a certain way. Specifically, I invite humans globally to imagine freedom as self-directing and self-transforming agency motivated by a concern to live a life that is good in the sense of ecologically attuned.

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In the proposed picture of freedom, ecological attunement calls for nonhierarchical relations between humans and other-than-human entities in both an epistemological and an ethical sense. It is incompatible with perspectives and practices in which human knowledges are deemed superior in principle to the knowledges of other-than-human entities, in which humans are held to be the sole source of ethical validity , in which humans are viewed as in principle commanding more respect than other-than-human beings and are accorded a privileged status within their natural environments. Developing a line of argument sketched in earlier work, I describe such theories and practices as epistemologically and ethically anthropocentric in a pernicious sense (Cooke, 2020a). Ecological attunement is my name for theoretical approaches and modes of human agency that are characterized by a relatively benign anthropocentric stance. It calls for attentiveness to the specific ethical characteristics and qualities of each particular entity, be it human or other-than-human. In this imagining of the good, human knowledges of the good are not in principle superior to nonhuman knowledges; moreover, the good is not determined exclusively by human concerns and interests, but has a partial independence of them. Since the good is not determined exclusively by human concerns and interests, it is not entirely produced through human activity. Even though knowledge of it is available to humans only through the filter of human thinking and action, they attribute to it some ontological independence of human thinking and action.[6] Put differently, the idea of the good is held to be partially human-transcending, , even though human interpretations of the good are inevitably through a human lens. Without some ontological independence of human concerns and interests, we humans could not learn more about the meaning of the good from our encounters with other-than-human entities: They could not be vehicles for new ethical meanings.[7]

2 | Freedom as self-directing human agency

An ecologically attuned perspective, and the orientation toward a (partially) human-transcending idea of the good required for this, is a central feature of my reimagining and rearticulation of the idea of freedom. A further key feature is critically engaged self-direction. In elaborating this idea, I draw on Karl Marx's writings on alienation in his 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Marx, 1997). One of the forms of alienation Marx describes in these early writings is the alienation of humans from their species-being. By this, he means alienation of humans from their capacity for freely purposive, creative, and self-reflective activity. More concretely, he understands freedom not only as the capacity of humans to set goals and pursue them without being bound by biological necessity—as the capacity to create according to the laws of beauty; he also understands it as the capacity of humans to make their life activity into the object of their will and consciousness. However, Marx does not satisfactorily develop this thought in his early manuscripts. Charles Taylor's view of the modern self as a strong evaluator can help to explicate it (Taylor, 1989).

Taylor holds that humans are self-interpreting creatures. By this he means that human relationships to the world are never simply given, but are constantly articulated, reconstituted, negotiated, and transformed through individual and cultural processes of interpretation. Furthermore, human interpretations of the world are always also an interpretation of self (and vice versa). The process of self-interpretation is driven by what Taylor calls strong evaluations. At any given time, these strong evaluations constitute evaluative roadmaps for human individuals. Stable identities and methodical human action are inconceivable without such roadmaps, which depict substantial ethical conceptions that embody ideas of the good: ideas about *what is important*, *what really matters* (Taylor, 1989). Strong evaluation has an integral *receptive* element, calling for openness to experiences in which the power of transcendent moral sources makes itself present in a full-bodied way to human subjects, requiring in turn flexibility, open-mindedness, sensitivity to others, and imaginativeness. Nonetheless, strong evaluation is also a mode of self-direction. This is because it requires human agents to ascertain *for themselves* what kind of person they would like to be and what paths they should pursue if they are to become that kind of person; furthermore, to take *responsibility* for their evaluative judgments. In addition, it has a crucial moment of critical reflection: In the context of strong evaluation, self-direction calls for evaluative discrimination by human agents among the aims in life they consider worth pursuing. Put differently, it calls for critical evaluation by human agents of the ethical quality of their actions, judgments, and life-trajectories.

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However, although strong evaluation presupposes an orientation toward the good, it leaves open the question of whether this orientation is ecologically attuned. Nor does strong evaluation necessarily involve self-transformation. Thus, in interpreting freedom in terms of ecologically attuned self-determining and self-transforming agency, I move beyond Taylor's conception of strong evaluation.

3 | Freedom as self-transforming human agency

Why do I connect freedom with self-transformation? Without a self-transforming component, freedom could not be construed as potentially transformative of society. Due to internalized patterns of thought and behavior, even critically engaged self-determining human agency might simply reproduce the socially prevailing patterns. Within Frankfurt School Critical Theory, this difficulty is thematized with the help of the concept of ideology. Early theorists in the Frankfurt School tradition proposed an understanding of ideology as a structurally induced, deeply entrenched, widespread false consciousness that prevents human agents, individually and collectively, from perceiving the need for fundamental social change and grasping the kind of change that is necessary (Adorno 1972; Horkheimer, 1973; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Marcuse, 1991; see Cooke, 2006b).[8] This helps to explain why even in societies in which many people pay lip service to the reality of ecological disaster, everyday practices continue to rely heavily on the appropriation of natural resources that are treated as unlimited (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

Social transformation is tied to self-transformation for a further reason: There is a strong likelihood that self-transformation will be necessary to *actualize* my proposed vision of human agency. This is because the current globally dominant social practices and patterns of everyday behavior are based on a logic of manipulation and control that is antithetical to ecologically attuned self-directing agency. Consequently, actualizing the envisaged mode of agency requires widespread fundamental self-transformations, if it is to become part of habitual behavior and everyday social practices on both individual and collective levels globally.

The question of self-transformation calls for the exploration of aesthetics. One of the distinctive features of Frankfurt School Critical Theory is its connection of the question of social change with art. However, rather than adopting a Kantian interpretation of aesthetics as "appreciation of beauty," as is common in the Frankfurt School tradition, I consider it more fruitful to retrieve and rearticulate the ancient Greek understanding of *aesthesis* as responsiveness to stimulation of the senses ("sensibility"), taking *aesthesis* to mean affectively based perceptual change. This widens the scope of aesthetics beyond the domain of art as it has been institutionalized in modern Western cultures and invites exploration of the nonauthoritarian transformative potentials of a multiplicity of social practices and experiences.

What are the main drivers of the ethical–aesthetic self-transformations that I advocate? There is no easy answer to this. It seems clear that there are multiple forces and factors. Certainly, all kinds of social institutions have a part to play: for example, economics, religion, the law, sport, family life, parliaments, schools, and art. Noninstitutionalized actions such as civil disobedience and related forms of activism may likewise be important contributing factors. Critical social theories themselves may play a part (I come back to this in my concluding remarks). Important, too, are life-changing experiences resulting, for example, from experimental life practices, encounters with different cultures, deep existential crises, and epiphanic spiritual conversions. Although we must acknowledge the multiplicity of forces and factors contributing to fundamental changes in ethical perceptions, not all are equally good from the point of view of my conceptualization of human agency as a mode of *freedom*, understood in terms of ethically motivated self-direction and self-transformation. This excludes authoritarian forces and factors. Simply prescribing ethical behavior, attitudes, and principles without endeavoring to engage the will and reason of each human globally would be a violation of freedom thus understood.[9] In consequence, the advocated ethical transformations must take place in a nonauthoritarian manner that permits the agents concerned to accept their ethical validity for reasons they can come to embrace as their own. As I have argued in earlier writings, social institutions are potential forces for nonauthoritarian ethical transformation of self and society (Cooke, 2020b). Let me briefly explain what I mean.

4 | The transformative potentials of social institutions: nonauthoritarian authority

What are social institutions? Classical sociological accounts of social institutions define them as socially constructed, supraindividual entities (Berger & Luckmann 1967). Examples include families, parliaments, religious bodies, trade unions, sports clubs, courts of justice, the internet, schools, the World Bank, the printed media, the United Nations, and cultural institutes.

I follow Luc Boltanski in using the term "institution" to refer to entities that primarily serve the semantic function of shaping and stabilizing social meanings (Boltanski, 2011). They have other important functions, such as policing and administration, but their primary role is to shape and stabilize meanings. In his words, "To institutions falls the task of saying and confirming what matters" (Boltanski, 2011); furthermore, they give an *enduring* semantic shape to reality, "they seem removed from the corruption of time" (p. 75).

However, although Boltanski's account of social institutions is helpful for its emphasis on the semantic shaping and stabilizing functions of social institutions, it pays no attention to the specifically *ethical* character of the meanings they shape and stabilize. By contrast, I emphasize the role of social institutions, individually and in configuration, in constituting webs of ethical meaning (cf. Jaeggi, 2009). In my account, social institutions are incorporations of—often diverse and sometimes conflicting—ethical values. As such, they have (more or less stable) ethical identities. The incorporated ethical values shaping their identities form a multilayered and multidimensional ethical sedimentation. This ethical sedimentation is the complex historical product of human interactions within the institution, as well as the institution's interactions with its environments, but it may pass unnoticed by the institution's members (broadly understood). Nonetheless, by way of their webs of ethical values, social institutions, more or less tacitly, provide their members with ethical orientation and guidance: they point them in certain ethical directions, thereby impacting on their particular identities as ethical beings, and provide concrete guidance in the everyday conduct of life.

This ethically orienting and guiding power defines the authority of social institutions. Its concrete manifestations include laws, ordinances, policies, prescriptions, recommendations, and doctrines. These are authoritative for particular human agents in particular life situations, whenever they affirm their importance as guides for living an ethically good life.

Authority is a distinctive form of power, differing, in particular, from domination. In contrast to power as domination, authority depends on acknowledgment of obligation, tacit or explicit, on the part of those over whom it is exercised. The 19th-century German historian Theodor Mommsen captures this feature when he describes the force of authority as "more than advice and less than a command, an advice that one may not safely ignore" (Mommsen, cited in Arendt, 1961).[10] Furthermore, it is an obligation that is in some sense self-imposed. This means that it has an integral moment of freedom. Hannah Arendt draws attention to this, making explicit a connection between authority and freedom that others, too, have noted (e.g., Marcuse, 2008). As she puts it: "Authority implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom" (Arendt, 1961). At a minimum, authority involves freedom in the sense of *voluntary* recognition and affirmation of the bearer of authority.

If social institutions are to exercise power that is authoritative, yet nonauthoritarian, they must be open to change in response to the ethical challenges they encounter from their members; these challenges may be directed at various aspects of the institution's ethically inflected identity: at its operation, its organization or its incorporated ideas of the good life. This means, in turn, that social institutions must see themselves, and be seen by their members, as in a permanent process of construction through contestation: They must recognize the inherent instability of their institutional identities. Social institutions must acknowledge, furthermore, that the process of construction is ethically motivated: driven by a (usually unarticulated) concern by their members to shape a particular institution's identity through the incorporation of particular ethical values. Since in the societies of democratic modernity, the ethical values orienting the members of social institutions are often plural and sometimes conflicting, the process of construction will be agonistic rather than harmonious. Nonetheless, the institution's members are potentially able to consider themselves part of a common project of construction—as coauthors of a common good that constitutes the (unstable) identity of the social institution in question, as well as coauthors of their own ethically self-determining, self-transforming agency. In

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short, for institutions to be nonauthoritarian, yet authoritative, they and their members must engage in a perpetual process of mutual identity construction.

This picture of institutional authority, too, could be described as utopian; however, once again, it is not abstractly idealistic. It resonates with many historical initiatives and social movements that sought to reconfigure social institutions along these lines. Think, for example, of the English, American, and French revolutions between the 17th and 19th centuries, which sought to reconfigure the institutions of government and the law; think of Pestalozzi in the late 18th and W. von Humboldt in the early 19th century, who sought, respectively, to reconfigure the institutions of early childhood education and the university; think of the successive waves of feminism from the 19th century onward, which sought to reconfigure the institutions of bourgeois marriage and the nuclear family; think of movements such as Lutheranism, Calvinism, Pietism, and Liberation Theology, which sought to reconfigure the institution of the Christian Church. This is not to deny that institutions are primarily forces for social inertia rather than ethical transformation. This is due in part to their functions of semantic shaping and stabilization. Coupled with their functions of policing and administration, this makes them susceptible to entrenched power hierarchies whose authoritative judgments and decisions appear to be unshakable. In consequence, the authority of social institutions tends to be authoritarian rather than freedom-enhancing, demanding unquestioning acceptance of the institution's ethical values and submission to the social practices and ways of thinking and acting that follow from these. Although, following Mommsen and Arendt, we may criticize authoritarian authority as a perversion, this does not alter the fact that social institutions are, at best, sites for a struggle between social inertia and authoritarianism, on the one side, and ethically transformative impulses, on the other, with the balance weighted toward the former side. Although this is true of all social institutions, some may be constitutionally better equipped than others to stimulate ethical-political transformations and promote freedom.[11] But to repeat, this is not to deny that *all* social institutions tend toward social inertia and are prone to exercise authority in an authoritarian rather than freedom-enhancing way.

5 | CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with some words on the aesthetic-ethical power of critically engaged sociopolitical theorizing. Such theorizing has a nonauthoritarian transformative force, which resides in its capacity for disclosure. Qua disclosure, it is an invitation to think, behave, and inhabit the world differently. Qua invitation (rather than a command), it is inherently nonauthoritarian. Adorno's writings are helpful in this respect. To be sure, the disclosive power of critical theorizing is rarely thematized explicitly in his writings; instead, it is *manifested* in them, for instance when he uses a wide range of rhetorical strategies to drive home his philosophical theses. It is particularly striking in *Dialectic* of *Enlightenment* (cf. Honneth, 2000), but it is also evident in Adorno's later work, where he employs linguistic resources, such as condensing or shifting meanings, suggestive metaphors and narrative presentations in order to disclose "pathologies" of social reality that hitherto have been unperceived or obscured. It seems to me fruitful to further elaborate this Adornian model of nonauthoritarian, transformative, critically engaged theorizing through comparison and contrast with the disclosive power of critically engaged *political oratory*. A good example here is Martin Luther King's public speeches and letters in his campaign of civil disobedience protesting against the existing societal order in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s. They display a highly developed talent for "civil translation," a practice that employs the semantic codes dominant in the existing societal order to create a narrative that makes it possible for the majority to identify with the grievances of the protestors (Cooke, 2019). The sociologist Jeffrey Alexander describes civil translation as first and foremost a mediating activity (Alexander, 2006). However, a closer examination shows that, in addition, it has a *disclosive* force: the potential to enable people to perceive suffering that they had previously not recognized as such (Cooke, 2021). In these times of ecological disaster, contemporary critical social theories should reaffirm this potential. Indeed, I see disclosure as a core task of any critically engaged mode of reflection on society that is geared toward ethically motivated, radical social change for the better. Radical change of this sort calls for changing our ways of relating to ourselves and others, human and nonhuman, and developing new pictures of agency and corresponding

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vocabularies. Without such fundamental transformations, we humans have no prospect of meeting the challenges of the Anthropocene.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Elsewhere I emphasize that critical social theorizing entails relentless and thoroughgoing critique of both its own projections of an ethically good life and of competing imaginings of such a life (Cooke, 2006a).

[2] In Cooke (2006a, Chapter 7), I distinguish between "good" and "bad" utopianism.

[3] As I explain below, the self-determining component excludes the authoritarian imposition of ideas of the good life.

[4] To be sure, even within capitalist modernity there have been countervailing tendencies, for example, within religious movements in which human dependence on a greater force is emphasized and in which humility is a virtue.

[5] Within the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory, it distinguishes my conception of social freedom from those offered by Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst, among others (Forst, 2014; Habermas, 1996; Honneth, 2014). It should be noted that I do not subscribe to Forst's and Habermas' sharp distinction between ethics and morality. I use 'ethics' in a general sense to refer to questions about what is right and what is good.

[6] This may call for a rethinking of the concept of "ontology."

[7] In my account, claims to the *validity* of human imaginings of the good, which are likely always to be multiple and conflicting, are treated as (partially) human-transcending in a double sense. First, in the sense of "universal in scope," for they encompass nonhuman and human concerns and interests. Second, in the sense of "truth analogous," for their validity is deemed to be partially transcending of human reasoning, though nonetheless dependent on it (Cooke, 2006a).

[8] Early Frankfurt School Critical Theory's conception of ideology as false consciousness harbors two interconnected dangers: one is the view that the prevailing false consciousness constitutes a system that is effectively unbreachable; the other is the view that only a dramatic revolutionary rupture will bring about the change in consciousness required for radical social transformation.

[9] See Cooke (2006a). Some theorists object that the *urgency* of the need to arrest ecological devastation, coupled with the global nature of the task, demands strong leadership capable of immediate action, top-down government, and extensive use of the resources of state bureaucracy: they claim that it is now too late for democratic processes and widespread democratic participation. This antidemocratic position is articulated forcefully by Andreas Malm, who fully acknowledges the risk that it opens the door for political authoritarianism and eco-fascism (Malm, 2018b).

[10] Cited in Arendt (1961). Mommsen writes: "In diesem Sinne ist auctoritas mehr als ein Ratschlag und weniger als ein Befehl, ein Ratschlag, dessen Befolgung man sich nicht füglich entziehen kann...."

[11] This claim calls for a case-by-case analysis of social institutions. In a recent paper, I argue that religious institutions have special features that make them potentially better equipped than others to function as forces for social transformation, although all too often they foster inertia and authoritarianism. Their ethically transformative potential resides in their built-in relation to transcendent ideas and a corresponding transcendent realm.

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