

Alienation, Vocation, and the Ontology of Life

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Introduction

FEW TWENTIETH-CENTURY TRADITIONS have analyzed the distortions of modern life more searchingly than the Frankfurt School and its successors. From reification and instrumental reason to communicative action and recognition, critical theory has shown that modern systems do more than organize collective life.¹ They shape desire, form consciousness, and condition how human beings are seen and treated. In this respect, critical theory helps us name how life becomes vulnerable to deformation within modern social orders.²

Yet the force of this diagnosis depends upon a prior question that the tradition does not fully resolve: what is life, such that its distortion can be identified as distortion rather than merely as historical variation? To designate a condition as alienated is not simply to describe a social arrangement. It is to judge that something proper to life has been obscured, violated, or denied. Such a judgment presupposes that life possesses an integrity and significance not reducible to the structures through which it is socially mediated. For if human existence were nothing more than the effect of historically emergent systems of production, communication, and recognition, then no particular configuration could claim normative priority over another except by reference to further historically contingent standards. Under those conditions, alienation would name only a determinate social formation experienced as burdensome, limiting, or unstable. It could mark dissonance within history, but not injury to life as such.³ To speak of injury, however, is already to imply that life is not exhausted by the conditions under which it presently appears, and that the social forms deforming it may therefore be judged by reference to a significance they do not themselves create.⁴

The point becomes especially clear where human beings are construed primarily in functional terms. Consider a worker subjected to degrading labor conditions,

treated as interchangeable, and valued only with respect to productivity. To say that such treatment is unjust is to claim more than that it violates prevailing norms or fails to satisfy the procedural expectations of reciprocal justification. It is to claim that a life has been wronged. The worker's protest—"I am worth more than this"—appeals to a significance neither conferred by the system in which the injury occurs nor nullified by that system's refusal to acknowledge it. Whether the matter is labor, disability, dependence, terminal decline, or organized violence, the underlying question remains the same: what must life be, such that its diminishment may be judged a wrong rather than merely a change in status, capacity, or social valuation? If alienation is to name a genuine wound, then the life that suffers alienation must possess a significance exceeding its functional place within a social order.⁵

This essay argues that critical theory, precisely in exposing alienation, tacitly presupposes an ontology of life that it cannot fully secure on postmetaphysical grounds alone.⁶ Even in its most sophisticated formulations—especially in Jürgen Habermas's account of communicative rationality and Axel Honneth's theory of recognition—the tradition relies upon the claim that human life is normatively significant in a manner not wholly derivable from historical mediation itself. What remains insufficiently clarified is the ontological status of the life whose violation critique seeks to name.⁷

To address this problem, the doctrine of vocation is retrieved not principally as a matter of personal calling or social role, but as an ontological claim about creaturely existence. Human life is neither self-grounding, nor the effect of autonomous self-assertion, nor merely the product of systemic determination. Its creaturely being is constituted by address: life is given before it is chosen and answerable before it is fully understood. To be human is to stand *coram Deo* before one can stand within any social order, and therefore also to live *coram hominibus* in concrete answerability to the neighbor.⁸ Understood in this sense, vocation does not sacralize the institutions and practices within which life unfolds. Rather, it names the prior givenness of life by reference to which those institutions and practices must themselves be judged. Theological language is therefore not an external supplement to critique. It articulates the condition under which critique may speak truthfully of injury, distortion, and alienation as wounds inflicted upon a life whose significance precedes social recognition.

The argument proceeds in five stages. First, the Frankfurt School's diagnosis of alienation and reification is revisited. Second, Habermas's and Honneth's efforts to reconstruct normativity through communication and recognition are examined. Third, these postmetaphysical reconstructions are shown to remain ontologically underdetermined, since they cannot fully account for the significance of the life they seek to defend. Fourth, the doctrine of vocation is retrieved as a theological account of creaturely life constituted by divine address. Finally, grace is shown to secure the intelligibility of critique by grounding life's excess over system.

I. Alienation and the Frankfurt Diagnosis

THE EARLIEST FRANKFURT SCHOOL THEORISTS were not concerned with producing a neutral sociology of modernity. Their work was animated by critique and protest. Horkheimer and Adorno, in particular, argued that modern society had come to be governed by a form of rationality oriented increasingly toward mastery, calculation, and control. Instrumental reason, they maintained, no longer functioned as a subordinate means directed toward substantively intelligible ends; instead, it began to shape the very terms on which social life was organized. Within such a horizon, persons and practices were evaluated less according to their intrinsic significance than according to their utility, exchangeability, and contribution to systemic efficiency. The result was not simply the presence of immoral conduct within an otherwise intelligible order, but a pervasive deformation of life at the level of its social constitution.⁹

The concept of *reification* names this deformation with particular precision. To treat persons as things is not merely to commit a conceptual error; it is to participate in, and thereby reproduce, a world in which the living are rendered functionally equivalent to objects. Persons become bearers of roles, moments within processes of production, and units within an administered totality. The wrong at issue does not consist solely in subjective dissatisfaction. Reification is condemnable because it violates something proper to the one reified. A person ought not to be treated as thing-like; yet this “ought not” cannot be generated from instrumental rationality itself, for instrumental rationality is indifferent to the distinction between creature and commodity. It asks only whether a given entity fulfills its assigned function. The protest against reification therefore already presupposes that human life possesses a dignity not conferred by function.¹⁰

Adorno’s resistance to totality sharpens this point. Negative dialectics refuses the closure of systems that would absorb the particular without remainder. Non-identity is not merely an epistemic caution against conceptual reduction. It also registers a protest against social forms that reduce the singular to what is administratively legible. The false whole is false because it does violence to the irreducibility of what it orders.¹¹ The ontological pressure of this claim is difficult to miss: reality resists total conceptual and social capture because life is not fully commensurable with the structures that mediate it.¹² Yet the ground of this irreducibility remains largely unthematized.¹³

The difficulty becomes especially clear when one returns to the example of the degraded worker. The worker subjected to dehumanizing conditions is not merely unfortunate. The condition is named alienation because the worker is being treated in a manner that falsifies what a human being is. The protest “I am worth more than this” possesses normative force precisely because it appeals beyond the prevailing

logic of the system. Critical theory can illuminate the mechanisms by which labor is dehumanized, the ways instrumental reason reduces the living to functions, and the manner in which social systems train consciousness to regard such reduction as natural. But when it judges such a condition to be dehumanizing, it has already assumed that the human being exceeds his or her socially assigned role.¹⁴

The first generation of Frankfurt theorists therefore secures a decisive insight while leaving a decisive question unresolved. Their critique shows with exceptional force what life is not: it is not merely instrument, resource, commodity, or functional substrate. Yet if this negation is to bear critical weight, a further question becomes unavoidable: what is life, such that its reduction to these forms counts as violence? The critique of alienation does not rest content with the registration of empirical dissatisfaction. It speaks in the stronger register of distortion. To describe a condition as distorted is already to imply that life possesses a proper significance whose denial can intelligibly count as injury. At precisely this point, critique presses beyond social description toward ontology.

II. Habermas and Honneth: The Reconstruction of Normativity

JÜRGEN HABERMAS (B. 1929) MAY BE UNDERSTOOD as undertaking the most ambitious effort within critical theory to secure normativity without returning to the metaphysical foundations the tradition had learned to distrust. For Habermas, the fundamental problem was not rationality as such, but its reduction to strategic success and technical control. Against this constriction, he distinguished communicative action from instrumental action and argued that human interaction is oriented, at least implicitly, toward mutual understanding. The lifeworld, as the shared horizon of meaning within which speakers and hearers interact, preserves resources of solidarity, identity, and normativity that cannot be reduced to system-coordination.¹⁵ Social pathologies may thus be identified as forms of lifeworld colonization rather than merely as regrettable institutional developments.¹⁶

This constitutes a substantial advance beyond the more unresolved moments of early Frankfurt thought. Habermas shows that critique need not ground itself in nostalgia or despair. The very conditions of possible communication contain normative presuppositions—intelligibility, reciprocity, truthfulness, and accountability—that render critique possible from within history rather than from some external Archimedean standpoint. Distortion is not simply whatever offends subjective sensibility. It is that which frustrates the communicative conditions under which persons are able to share a world.

Yet even this reconstruction leaves a further question. Why should undistorted communication count as a proper form of life rather than merely a pragmatically useful one? Why should colonization be judged loss rather than transformation? Habermas

clarifies the normative presuppositions of discourse, but he does not thereby fully explain why the life protected by such discourse possesses a significance irreducible to communicative procedure itself. The achievement is considerable, but it remains internal to the structure of social interaction. It reconstructs normativity immanently; it does not finally ground the worth of the life those norms are meant to protect.

Habermas' student, Axel Honneth (b. 1949), extends and, in some respects, deepens this reconstruction by shifting attention from discourse to recognition. Human beings do not become selves in abstraction; they become selves through socially structured patterns of acknowledgment. Love, legal respect, and social esteem form the matrix within which self-confidence, self-respect, and self-worth emerge. The pathologies of modern life are therefore not only failures of communication but also failures of recognition. Experiences such as humiliation, invisibility, and disrespect wound because they damage the conditions under which individuals are able to realize themselves as selves. The moral grammar of social life is thus not exhausted by formal reciprocity; it also includes the lived practices of acknowledgment through which persons are recognized as who they are.¹⁷

Here again, the advance is genuine. Honneth helps explain why injustice is experienced not merely as procedural disorder but as an injury to lived personhood. The grammar of critique thereby becomes richer. Yet the same question reappears with renewed force. Why does misrecognition wound? If recognition is wholly the product of social relations, its absence may be painful and politically consequential; but why must it also count as unjust in a stronger sense? Why should reciprocal recognition be understood as a proper orientation of life rather than merely one historically contingent mode of social integration? Honneth illuminates the intersubjective constitution of the self. Yet the ultimate source of the self's worth—the ground that would explain why its denial counts as injury—remains underdescribed.¹⁸

This is not to say that Habermas and Honneth fail. On the contrary, their very success discloses the remaining problem. Both resist reductionism. Both preserve life's communicative and relational dimensions. Both show that persons cannot be understood merely as functions of a system. Yet precisely because they preserve this excess of life over system, they intensify the ontological question: what must life be such that distortion, colonization, humiliation, and misrecognition count as injuries rather than merely as rearrangements? While their accounts reconstruct the internal logic of normativity, they do not fully secure its ultimate ground.¹⁹

III. Why Immanent Normativity Remains Insufficient

THE ARGUMENT HERE IS NOT THAT CRITICAL THEORY remains inert until theology appears to complete it. Nor is it that Habermas and Honneth are covert theologians. The claim

is both narrower and stronger. Their work shows that critique necessarily operates with an understanding of life as normatively significant, while also revealing that this significance cannot be fully derived from structures of mediation alone. To judge a communicatively distorted or recognitionally damaged life as wrong is already to presuppose that life possesses a significance prior to—and not exhausted by—the historical forms through which it is mediated.²⁰

The matter may be stated by attending to the “ought not” implicit in the language of alienation. When a worker says, “I am worth more than this,” the claim does not mean merely that a society ought to revise its prevailing patterns of recognition, nor merely that a speech act has failed to receive its proper uptake. It means that the present order fails to honor something real. The protest reaches beyond currently operative norms toward the dignity of the one who speaks. If that dignity is itself wholly constituted by historically contingent practices of recognition or communication, then the protest becomes vulnerable to the same contingency. It may remain rhetorically effective, but its stronger claim to binding force is correspondingly weakened.

Critical theory therefore inhabits a genuine tension. Its resistance to metaphysical grounding is not arbitrary. Appeals to “human nature,” “order,” or “essence” have often functioned ideologically, stabilizing domination under the guise of timeless truth. Yet even in rejecting such appeals, critique continues to rely upon the judgment that life is not reducible to the structures that presently configure it. It condemns reification because persons are not things. It condemns colonization because the lifeworld is not merely a substrate for system. It condemns misrecognition because the subject is worthy of more than contingent affirmation. In each case, it tacitly affirms that life exceeds its mediation. The unresolved question is whether this excess can be sustained without some account of its ground.²¹

It is at this point that theology becomes relevant—not as a decorative supplement, but as a possible articulation of what critique already presupposes. The transition from critique to theology is therefore not arbitrary. It follows from the internal logic of alienation itself. If modern life is indeed pervasively mediated and frequently deformed by structural forces, theology must not evade that diagnosis through pious invocations of order or duty. Yet if such deformation is also judged unjust, theology may properly ask what account of life renders that judgment intelligible. The question is not whether theology can supply one additional perspective among others. It is whether the doctrine of creaturely life can name what critique requires, yet cannot fully state on its own terms.²²

The danger in such a move is evident. Theology may simply reintroduce the very ideological stabilizations that critical theory has learned to suspect. Appeals to order, nature, or calling can function to sanctify historically contingent forms of

domination. Theological language is not exempt from critique merely because it is theological. The question, then, is not whether theology supplies one additional perspective among others. It is whether the doctrine of creaturely life can name the ground of the significance that critique already assumes but cannot fully state on its own terms.²³

IV. Vocation as Ontological Address

THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION IS FREQUENTLY reduced in modern usage, to profession, task, or socially assigned role. Once reduced in this way, it becomes immediately susceptible to Weberian suspicion. If “calling” means little more than the sacralization of one’s place within a labor system, then vocation can indeed appear as one of the religious forms by which capitalist modernity legitimates discipline and productivity. In that form, vocation would function less as critique than as ideological reinforcement. The suspicion is not without warrant. A theology of vocation inattentive to structural violence readily becomes a sanctification of domination.

Yet such a reduction confuses derivative enactments with primary constitution. In its more fundamental theological sense, vocation does not first name what one does. *Instead it names what one is: a creature called into being, relation, and responsibility.* Human life is neither self-grounding, nor the effect of autonomous self-assertion, nor merely the product of systemic determination. Its creaturely being is constituted by address. To be human is to exist as called. This does not mean that one receives private divine instructions. It means, rather, that life is received rather than self-originated and is therefore intrinsically answerable.

For the present argument, vocation is especially apt among several available theological alternatives. One might appeal to natural law, a general doctrine of creation, participation metaphysics, or the *imago Dei*. Each possesses substantial resources. Vocation, however, uniquely integrates the ontological and historical dimensions at issue in the problem of alienation. It affirms ontological givenness: life is called prior to achievement, productivity, or recognition. It insists upon relational enactment: the self is not constituted in self-possession, nor generated through relation, but enacted in answerability to the neighbor, a distinction already implicit in Luther’s account of the inner and outer human being.²⁴ It preserves historical embeddedness: calling is lived within concrete social forms rather than above them. Finally, it preserves the possibility of critique: because the dignity of life precedes system, systems may be judged. Vocation thus names not merely a task within history, but the ontological form of life as given and sent.

The classical Reformation grammar renders this point with particular precision: life is always lived *coram Deo* and *coram hominibus*—before God and before

others. These are not two separable spaces but two inseparable dimensions of one creaturely reality. Human beings are not first autonomous subjects who subsequently enter into relation. Nor are they first products of social recognition who then project transcendence. They are creatures addressed by God and therefore answerable to others. The ordering is decisive. Only because life is first constituted *coram Deo* can it become responsible *coram hominibus* without collapsing either into self-grounding autonomy or into total dependence upon social validation.

The *coram Deo* dimension names the givenness of life. Prior to social mediation—prior to recognition or misrecognition, prior to participation in discourse, prior to integration into economic and political structures—life stands before God. Its worth is not conferred by system, negotiated through procedure, or bestowed by successful recognition. It is given. Address precedes action; grace precedes achievement. Here one reaches precisely the ontological claim that critical theory cannot itself supply. Alienation wounds because life is not merely system-grounded. Reification is violence because the one reified stands before God as called and known. Misrecognition is injustice because the one denied affirmation bears a dignity not generated by that affirmation.

The *coram hominibus* dimension ensures that this claim does not collapse into inward religiosity. Life before God does not terminate in private consolation; it issues in responsibility. One is called into concrete relations—labor, family, polity, speech, and institutional life. These are not ultimate identities but historical fields within which a prior calling is enacted. The decisive distinction, therefore, is not between a “spiritual” realm and a “social” realm, but between the ground of life and its mediated enactment. Vocation names both. Life is received from God and enacted toward the neighbor.

This distinction addresses the Frankfurt suspicion directly. If vocation were nothing more than identification with one’s station, it would indeed sanctify alienation. But if vocation is first ontological address, then no social structure can exhaust it. While structures mediate vocation, they cannot generate it. They may enable its enactment, but they may also deform it. For that reason, fidelity to calling may require participation, reform, or resistance. One’s calling is never simply identical with one’s assigned function within structures of domination. Properly understood, vocation is not the theological legitimation of social place; it is the theological ground from which the legitimacy of social place may be contested.

V. Freedom, the Word, and the Ontological Priority of Faith

LUTHER’S ACCOUNT OF FREEDOM IN *De libertate christiana* is neither psychological nor merely ethical; it is ontological, grounded in the relation between the divine Word

and the being of the human person. Freedom is not first a capacity of the will, but a consequence of a more fundamental reality: the way in which the human person stands before God in relation to the Word that addresses and constitutes him. Accordingly, Luther's famous paradox—"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all"²⁵—does not describe two competing ethical dispositions, but expresses a single ontological condition viewed under two aspects.

Luther's argument begins not with action but with being. The human person is divided between an *inner* and an *outer* dimension, not as two substances, but as two modes of relation: the inner person (*homo interior*) stands *coram Deo*, while the outer person (*homo exterior*) stands within the world of works and relations (*coram hominibus*).²⁶ What is decisive is that the condition of the inner person determines the entire structure of the self. "One thing, and one thing only, is necessary for life, justification, and Christian liberty," Luther writes, "and that is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ."²⁷

This claim must be read not merely theologically, but metaphysically. The Word is not an external report about divine realities; it is the medium of divine agency itself. It does not stand alongside reality as its description, but stands at the origin of the believer's relation to God as its constitutive ground. The Word effects what it declares. Faith, accordingly, is not primarily a human act directed toward the Word, but the mode in which the human person is taken up into the efficacy of the Word. The Word of God cannot be received and honored by any works, but only by faith.²⁸ Faith names not a contribution to the Word's work, but the form in which that work is received.

The asymmetry between faith and works is therefore not merely moral but causal. Works belong to the outer person and cannot penetrate to the level at which the person is constituted *coram Deo*. "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works."²⁹ The direction of dependence is decisive: being determines action because being is determined by the Word. To invert this order is not simply to err ethically; it is to mislocate the source of the human person's reality before God.

Luther makes this structure explicit through the language of union. "Faith... unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom."³⁰ This union is not metaphorical ornamentation but ontological claim. In it, there is a real *communicatio*: what belongs to Christ becomes the believer's, and what belongs to the believer is taken up into Christ. Such exchange presupposes not mere attribution but participation. The righteousness of Christ is not merely counted as the believer's; it is given in and through the Word as the believer's new mode of being *coram Deo*.

Here the causal structure of Luther's account becomes fully visible. The Word does not merely occasion a change in self-understanding; it brings about a change in the being of the person addressed. Divine agency is not located behind the Word as a hidden cause subsequently inferred; it is present in the Word as its effective power. To say that the believer is justified by faith alone is therefore to say that the human person is constituted in relation to a Word whose efficacy is not dependent upon prior human capacities. Faith is the reception of a causality that does not arise from the human subject, but from the divine address that precedes and grounds it.

From this ontological and causal priority of the Word follows the paradox of freedom. Because the believer's standing before God is wholly determined by the Word and not by works, he is free from all attempts to secure himself through action. No work is required to establish his righteousness *coram Deo*; therefore, no work can bind him. In this sense, the Christian is "lord of all," subject to none. Yet precisely because his being is secured by a causality not his own, he is liberated for action within the world. Works no longer function as attempts to bring about a condition of righteousness; they follow from a righteousness already effected.

The movement toward the neighbor must therefore be understood as the secondary expression of a primary determination. "From faith thus flow a love and joy in the Lord," Luther writes, "and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly."³¹ The sequence is not accidental but necessary: Word → faith → love → service. The outer life of the Christian is thus not the site at which the self is constituted, but the sphere in which a prior constitution is enacted.

Vocation, accordingly, cannot be understood as the ground of the self. It is the ordered field within which the self, already constituted by the Word, is lived. To treat vocation as generative of identity is to displace the Word and to relocate causality within the system of works. Luther's account resists this move at its root. The self is not produced by its roles, nor stabilized by its recognition within them. It is given through a Word whose efficacy precedes and exceeds all social mediation.

In this way, Luther's doctrine of freedom provides a more radical ground for critique than critique can supply on its own terms. If the human person is constituted through a causality that does not arise from social structures, then no structure can claim ultimacy over human life. Institutions may organize, mediate, and even distort creaturely existence, but they do not generate its being. Because life is constituted through divine address, it always exceeds the forms in which it is socially realized. Critique becomes possible precisely because the human person is not exhaustively determined by the systems in which he appears.

VI. The Worker Revisited: A Concrete Test Case

THE PARADOX ARTICULATED ABOVE PROVIDES the decisive interpretive key for the present case. If the human being is at once free before all and bound to all, then neither dimension may be collapsed into the other without distortion. The worker therefore cannot be understood merely as a function within a system, nor as a self-grounding agent defined by autonomous productivity. The worker exists under a prior determination: as one whose life is given and who is therefore answerable. It is precisely this duplex condition that is obscured under conditions of alienation.

The worker is not first a labor-function. To reduce the worker to labor-function is to deny the first half of the paradox: that the human being stands as *dominus*, free before all determination of use or value. But to abstract the worker into a merely inward dignity detached from concrete relations is to deny the second: that the human being is *servus*, bound in responsibility to the neighbor. Alienation thus operates by a double distortion. It denies freedom by collapsing the person into function, and it denies responsibility by rendering relations instrumental rather than responsive. What is lost is not merely proper recognition within a system, but the very structure of creaturely existence.

Nor is the worker's dignity constituted by managerial recognition, legal standing, or discursive inclusion. The worker stands *coram Deo* as called, known, and accorded worth prior to every economic valuation, and therefore cannot be exhaustively defined by any system of valuation. This does not abolish labor; it relativizes the system's claim to define the worker exhaustively through labor. The worker's humanity exceeds employability, efficiency, productivity, and institutional usefulness. Dehumanizing labor conditions are therefore not merely unfortunate arrangements within a defective economy. They are distortions of creaturely life. The person is treated in a manner that contradicts the prior givenness of life as address.

This also clarifies the scope and limit of theological critique. It cannot simply denounce "the system" in abstraction while neglecting the concrete forms through which persons live. Nor can it retreat into a language of inward dignity that leaves institutions untouched. Because vocation is lived *coram hominibus* no less than *coram Deo*, the forms of labor, compensation, recognition, and protection within which the worker exists matter fundamentally. The worker is called not away from the world, but within it. For that reason, theological reflection cannot oppose ontological dignity to social transformation, as though the former rendered the latter unnecessary. On the contrary, because dignity is given, social conditions may be judged more exactly and more severely.

At the same time, vocation resists reducing dignity to historical success. If life were wholly constituted by recognition achieved within struggle, then the oppressed

would possess full dignity only to the extent that emancipation advanced. The doctrine of vocation denies this conclusion. The worth of the humiliated does not await successful recognition in order to become real. It is already secured in divine address. This does not diminish emancipatory struggle. It prevents the dignity of the oppressed from being suspended pending victory. Grace does not replace justice; it prevents justice from becoming the creator of the worth it seeks to defend.

The worker's protest—"I am worth more than this"—may therefore be heard in two registers at once. In one register, it is a claim advanced within moral and political argument. In another, deeper register, it bears witness to a truth about creaturely existence: life is given before it is managed, called before it is assigned, and answerable before it is optimized. It is thus an implicit refusal of the reduction of the person to function and an affirmation that responsibility cannot be reduced to instrumentality. What is at stake is the structure of human existence itself: that the human being is free before all determinations of use and yet bound in responsibility to others.

Critical theory interprets the first register with considerable sophistication. Theology, through the doctrine of vocation, names the second. The two are not competitors. The latter secures the intelligibility of the former's critique.

VII. Grace as the Ontological Ground of Critique

THE CENTRAL CLAIM OF THIS ESSAY MAY NOW be stated with greater precision. Critical theory's protest against alienation presupposes that human life exceeds the systems that organize it. Theology names the source of that excess as grace. Yet grace must here be understood neither as inward religious experience nor as a supplementary theological category appended to an otherwise complete account of social life. It names, rather, the manner in which human existence is constituted through the efficacious Word of God. Grace is not an added quality of life; it is the mode in which life is given at all.³²

Understood in this way, grace is inseparable from divine agency. It does not denote a passive background condition, but the active address by which God brings the human person into being *coram Deo*. The Word that justifies is not descriptive but effective: it establishes the reality it declares. Grace, therefore, is not the recognition that life has value; it is the act by which life is constituted as answerable, dignified, and held in relation to God prior to every human work, achievement, or social validation.³³ What critique requires—that life matters antecedently to its recognition within a system—is here grounded in the efficacy of the Word.

This claim does not weaken critique; it renders it intelligible at a deeper level. If the human person is constituted through a divine address that precedes all social mediation, then no social order can claim ultimacy over that person. Every system is

thereby relativized. Institutions may organize life, distribute recognition, and shape possibilities of action, but they do not generate the being of the persons who inhabit them. For that reason, institutions may be inhabited, reformed, or resisted without being absolutized. Vocation, accordingly, cannot be the ground of the self. It is the historical field in which a self, already constituted through the Word, is enacted.³⁴

Grace also prevents critique from collapsing into immanence. If rational agency were wholly the effect of structural location, protest would risk becoming merely another function of the system it opposes. Its normative force would be reduced to positional expression. But if the human person is constituted through a causality not reducible to social processes, then critique is not merely reactive but answerable to a prior determination. The protest against alienation is not only a strategic response to injustice; it is a witness—however inarticulate—to the fact that human life is not exhausted by what history makes of it.³⁵

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* sharpens this point without reintroducing a metaphysical abstraction detached from history. To bear the divine image is not to possess an isolated essence beneath social existence, but to be constituted for relation through divine address. The human person exists as one who is spoken to and thereby rendered capable of speaking truthfully in turn. In this respect, theology and critical theory converge in rejecting the fiction of a self-grounding subject. Yet they diverge decisively in their account of the ground of relation.

Recognition theory locates the emergence of selfhood within intersubjective affirmation; theology locates its ultimate ground in the Word that calls the person into being and thereby makes such affirmation both possible and necessary.³⁶

The relation between critical theory and theology may therefore be described not as competition but as asymmetrical clarification. Critical theory exposes the ways in which social systems distort, instrumentalize, and occlude human life. It rightly resists any appeal to “order” or “vocation” that reconciles persons to such distortions. Theology, however, articulates the ontological depth that critique presupposes but cannot secure on its own terms. It clarifies why reification is not merely inefficiency but loss, why misrecognition is not merely procedural failure but distortion of reality, and why the reduction of persons to functions is not merely unjust but false. If life is constituted through divine address, then commodification entails not only misuse but misdescription; if life is called, then its reduction to system is not only oppressive but unintelligible.³⁷

Grace thus names the condition under which critique itself becomes possible. It does not replace critique, nor does it soften its edge. It secures the claim that human life is more than the roles it occupies, more than the recognition it receives, and more than the history that shapes it—because it is first the effect of a Word whose efficacy no system can contain.³⁸

VIII. Conclusion

THE FRANKFURT TRADITION AND ITS SUCCESSORS have performed an indispensable service by exposing the ways modern social orders absorb life into structures of instrumentality, administration, and exchange. Their analyses of reification, communicative distortion, and misrecognition remain essential for any theologically responsible account of modern existence. They prevent theology from mistaking historically contingent arrangements for sacred order and compel a reckoning with the forms of domination through which creaturely life is deformed.

Yet the critique of alienation cannot rest with diagnosis alone. To name life as alienated is already to presuppose that life possesses an integrity capable of violation. Habermas and Honneth reconstruct this integrity within the spheres of communication and recognition with remarkable sophistication. What they do not finally explain, however, is why the life protected by such norms bears the significance those accounts require. The unresolved question therefore remains: what must life be such that its deformation counts as injustice rather than mere rearrangement?

The doctrine of vocation provides a theological answer to that question. Human life is not constituted by system, recognition, or communicative performance alone, but by divine address. To be human is to stand *coram Deo* and therefore *coram hominibus*: before God and before others, received and answerable, given and sent. Understood in this way, vocation does not sanctify alienation. It names the prior dignity of life by reference to which alienation can be recognized as distortion. Social systems may therefore be judged because they do not constitute life absolutely. Grace secures what critique presupposes but cannot finally ground on its own: that life matters prior to performance, recognition, or any social determination. It names the givenness of life as called and sustained prior to every achievement.

The relation between critical theory and theology is therefore neither simple opposition nor easy synthesis. Critical theory discloses the deformations that theology must never conceal beneath the language of order, duty, or calling. Theology, in turn, articulates the ontological depth without which critique cannot finally say what its protest already knows: that alienation is not merely dislocation but injury. It can say this because life is not first system but gift, not first function but address, not first achievement but call. And because life is thus given, it may also be judged. Systems may be criticized, institutions reformed, domination resisted, and dignity defended. For life does not receive its worth from the orders that govern it; it receives its worth from the grace that calls it into being before God and before others.

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Notes

1. “Reification” designates the treatment of persons and relations under the logic of thinghood; “instrumental reason,” the reduction of rationality to calculation in the service of control; “communicative action,” interaction ordered toward mutual understanding; and “recognition,” the intersubjective acknowledgment through which personal identity and social standing are constituted and sustained. Together, these terms trace major trajectories within Frankfurt School critical theory from its early diagnosis of domination to its later reconstruction of normativity (see sources in n.2).
2. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), and *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).
3. “Injury” here does not designate merely experienced harm, social disadvantage, or the frustration of historically contingent expectations. It designates a violation of the integrity proper to life, such that a condition may be judged not only oppressive or disfavored, but as constituting a distortion in a stronger normative sense. For related accounts of moral injury within critical theory, see Axel Honneth, “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 187–201; and J. M. Bernstein, “Suffering Injustice: Misrecognition as Moral Injury in Critical Theory,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13, no. 3 (2005): 303–24.
4. On the problem of normativity and its grounding within critical theory, see especially Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 55–75; Maeve Cooke, “Redeeming Redemption: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Social Theory,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30, no. 4 (2004): 413–29; Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 193–220.
5. The term “alienation” has a complex history. In Ludwig Feuerbach, it names the projection of essential human powers onto an objectified divine other, such that humanity becomes estranged from its own species-being (see Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot [New York: Harper & Row, 1957]). In Karl Marx, the term is reconfigured socially and materially to describe conditions under which labor, its products, and the worker’s own activity confront the worker as alien powers (see Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney

Livingstone and Gregor Benton [London: Penguin, 1975]). Within the Frankfurt tradition, the concept is further widened to diagnose forms of reification, domination, and systemic distortion in which human life is reduced to function, exchangeability, or administrative legibility (see Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971]; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). The term is used here in this latter, expanded sense, while retaining the stronger claim that alienation signifies not mere dissatisfaction or dislocation, but a distortion of life that may properly be judged injurious.

6. “Postmetaphysical” designates approaches that seek to account for normativity without appeal to a comprehensive metaphysics of being, nature, or order. In Habermas and Honneth, this entails reconstructing normative validity from historically situated practices of communication and recognition rather than grounding it in a prior ontological or theological account of life (see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 1:8–42; Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*). The claim advanced here is that such reconstructions remain illuminating yet insufficient with respect to the question of why life itself possesses the significance critique presupposes.
7. For representative postmetaphysical reconstructions of normativity, see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 1:8–42; Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*; and Allen, *End of Progress*. For a critical account of the unresolved grounding problem, see Allen, *End of Progress*, 193–220.
8. *Coram Deo* and *coram hominibus* are classical theological terms meaning, respectively, “before God” and “before human beings.” In Luther’s usage, they identify two inseparable dimensions of human existence: the creature stands before God as recipient and respondent, and before the neighbor in concrete offices, relations, and responsibilities. The distinction is not spatial, nor does it separate “religious” from “worldly” life. Rather, it marks the difference between the divine source and judgment of life and the ordinary social forms in which that life is lived. In the present argument, *coram Deo* names the ontological givenness of life, while *coram hominibus* names its historical enactment toward the neighbor.
9. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1–34; Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1982), 188–243.
10. Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 83–222; Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, with commentaries by Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss, and Jonathan Lear (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 17–56.
11. Adorno’s “totality” names the tendency of both philosophical systems and modern institutions to construe reality as a closed, self-explanatory whole. “Negative dialectics” resists such closure by insisting upon *Nichtidentität*, the excess of the object over its conceptual determination. The “false whole” is thus not merely incomplete but violent, securing unity through the suppression of irreducible particularity (see Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton [New York: Continuum, 1973], 5–11).
12. The present claim extends Adorno’s negative insight. Where non-identity marks the failure of conceptual capture, the argument here construes this resistance ontologically:

- the excess of life over its mediation reflects not merely epistemic limitation but points toward the irreducibility of the real.
13. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5–11; Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 50.
 14. See Geuss, *Idea of a Critical Theory*, 55–75; and Allen, *End of Progress*, 193–220, on the unresolved problem of grounding normativity within critical theory.
 15. Habermas distinguishes communicative from instrumental action: the former oriented toward mutual understanding through reasons in principle acceptable to participants in communication, the latter toward success and control (see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 1:8–42). The “lifeworld” names the shared horizon of meaning presupposed in such interaction and threatened by systemic colonization (see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 2:113–197).
 16. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 1:8–42; 2:113–197, 332–73.
 17. Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, 92–139 (on the spheres of recognition and the formation of selfhood).
 18. Axel Honneth, “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 187–201; J. M. Bernstein, “Suffering Injustice: Misrecognition as Moral Injury in Critical Theory,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13, no. 3 (2005): 303–24.
 19. Maeve Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 1–25; Rainer Forst, *The Right to Justification: Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice*, trans. Jeffrey Flynn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1–42, for influential attempts to reconstruct normativity within postmetaphysical frameworks.
 20. See Geuss, *Idea of a Critical Theory*, 55–75; Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society*, 1–25; and Allen, *End of Progress*, 193–220, for representative accounts of normativity reconstructed from socially mediated practices.
 21. The issue may be framed in terms of grounding: if judgments of distortion presuppose the normative significance of life, then the question concerns that in virtue of which such significance obtains. For accounts of grounding as a relation of metaphysical dependence, see Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, eds. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 347–83 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Kit Fine, “The Question of Ontology,” in *Metametaphysics*, 157–77.
 22. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3–46; Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 1–15. The grounding problem may be recast theologically: if judgments of alienation presuppose a normative significance irreducible to social mediation, then that significance requires an account of creaturely life not exhausted by historical form.
 23. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002), 79–125, on the transformation of the concept of calling (*Beruf*) within early modern Protestantism and its relation to the rationalization of social life.
 24. Martin Luther, *De libertate christiana* (1520), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 7:50.5–8, hereafter WA; English

- translation in Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian” (1520): vol. 31, pp. 344–45, in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg Press/Fortress Press, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter LW. *Homo enim duplici constat natura, spirituali et corporali: iuxta spiritualem ... vocatur spiritualis, interior; novus homo, iuxta corporalem ... exterior, vetus homo.*
25. WA 7:49.3–5; LW 31:344.
 26. WA 7:49–51; LW 31:344–346.
 27. WA 7:50.33–35; LW 31:345.
 28. WA 7:51.1–3; LW 31:345.
 29. WA 7:61.26–27; LW 31:361.
 30. WA 7:54.31–32; LW 31:351.
 31. WA 7:66.7–10; LW 31:367.
 32. WA 7:50.33–35; LW 31:345. The claim presupposes Luther’s understanding of the Word as *verbum efficax*—not merely descriptive but constitutive of the relation *coram Deo*. On the ontological and linguistic stakes of this claim, see Dennis Bielfeldt, “Luther on Language,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 195–213, esp. 196–202.
 33. *Non operibus neque legibus, sed verbo dei (id est promissio ne gratiae) et fide iustificatur et salvatur*; WA 7: 63.3–5; LW 31:362–363. The point is ontological: the Word alone determines the person’s standing *coram Deo*, apart from works, law, or social validation.
 34. *Bona opera non faciunt bonum virum, sed bonus vir facit bona opera... primum personam ipsam hominis esse bonam vel malam, antequam faciat bonum vel malum opus*; WA 7:61.26–37; LW 31:361–62. This remains decisive against any account of vocation that allows enacted role, function, or social mediation to become constitutive of the self, rather than expressions of a person already constituted *coram Deo*.
 35. *Christianum hominem non vivere in seipso, sed in Christo et proximo suo ... in Christo per fidem, in proximo per caritatem*; WA 7:69.12–15; LW 31:371. The order is crucial: relation to the neighbor is real and necessary, but derivative of and grounded in relation to Christ through faith. This prevents both the collapse of the self into social mediation and any appeal to an isolated inward essence, preserving a relational account of life grounded in the prior determination of the person *coram Deo*. On the semantic and ontological stakes of this structure, see Dennis Bielfeldt, “Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language,” *Modern Theology* 6 (1990): 121–35, esp. 122–30.
 36. The *imago Dei* is not programmatically treated in *De libertate christiana*, but its structure is implicit in the distinction between inner and outer person and in the Word’s constitutive efficacy. On divine address as ontologically effective, see Dennis Bielfeldt, “Creatio ex Nihilo in Luther’s Genesis Commentary and the Causal Question,” manuscript posted on academia.edu, August 2012), 17–19, https://www.academia.edu/12405696/Creatio_ex_Nihilo_in_Luthers_Genesis_Commentary_and_the_Causal_Question. Accessed March 29, 2026.
 37. David Tracy’s account of a surplus irreducible to any closed social totality remains suggestive; see *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), esp. 99–153. Yet if such surplus is construed only as analogical disclosure, the normative force of critique remains underdetermined and

thus, at a crucial point, unintelligible. The present argument therefore locates this surplus not in disclosure as such but in the efficacious address of the Word. Theology here does not merely redescribe depth; it grounds critique in divine agency.

38. *Christianus homo omnium dominus est liberrimus, nulli subiectus. Christianus homo omnium servus est officiosissimus, omnibus subiectus.* WA 7:49.21–25; LW 31:344. This paradox is not rhetorical but ontological: the priority of faith establishes a freedom no social order can contain, and precisely thereby grounds the necessary movement of love toward the neighbor.

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