ON THE AMBIVALENCE OF RECOGNITION

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Abstract

In this article I address the idea that recognition is fundamentally ambivalent: not only can there be bad forms of recognition – misrecognition, nonrecognition, disrespect – but that even the good or adequate forms of recognition may in some ways be detrimental to the recipient or sustain societal domination (Ikäheimo, Lepold, Stahl 2021). One version of the challenge is that social movements do better by focusing on other concepts than recognition, for their progressive aims. I will discuss the non-consequentialist nature of adequacy of recognition, value pluralism, the rewards of submissiveness, dialectical progression to adequate recognition, and "ambivalence of being" as providing partial explanations for the ambivalence of recognition, while arguing that adequate recognition is only contingently ambivalent. By discussing these challenges, I continue to articulate a conception of mutual recognition and misrecognition that I have developed earlier (Laitinen 2002, 2003, 2010, 2012, Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2007).

Keywords: Ambivalence, Recognition, Misrecognition, Non-consequentialism, Pluralism, Respect, Esteem.

Introduction

In the volume *Ambivalence of Recognition* (Ikäheimo, Lepold, Stahl 2021), the editors helpfully distinguish several approaches to whether recognition is ambivalent. The first, theoretically "optimist" version thinks that it is possible to distinguish adequate recognition from disrespect or misrecognition. This approach "relies on a dichotomy between recognition as a relation between self and other that *affects individual lives for the better* and disrespect as a relation between self and other that *affects individual lives for the worse*."(Ikäheimo, Lepold, Stahl 2021, 3; italics added).[1] Taylor (1992) and Honneth (1992, 2012, 2014, 2021) are men-

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1   Note that the first approach need not be historically optimist in thinking that the amount of disrespect or misrecognition will decrease, or in having faith that his-

tioned as representatives of this account.[2] The other approaches "portray not only disrespect but recognition itself as a deeply ambivalent phenomenon."(Ikäheimo, Lepold, Stahl 2021, 3). The idea of ambivalence is that given the criteria of adequate and inadequate recognition (disrespect, misrecognition), something that counts as adequate recognition may nonetheless affect individual lives for the worse. In this essay, I will first discuss the criteria of adequate and inadequate recognition and the explore how it could be that fully adequate recognition fails to be beneficial to the recipient. I suggest that the non-consequentialist nature of adequacy of recognition can to some extent help to understand how adequate recognition, respect and esteem can nonetheless affect individual lives for the worse (either because recognition fails to support the recipient's positive relations-to-self, or even despite supporting them).[3]

On the second, Hegelian, account, "almost every configuration of recognitive relations may turn out to be unsatisfactory, freedom-undermining, or a vehicle of domination" (3). The theoretically "optimist" views would have to say that to that extent, the configuration is actually a case of misrecognition. The Hegelian, dialectical, account can presumably say that no, the case can be of adequate *recognition*, but nonetheless unsatisfactory in its other effects to one's life, such as constituting a denial of freedom, or constituting domination. I think the "optimist" and "Hegelian" accounts would agree that adequate recognition can of course be experienced as subjectively unsatisfactory (and so, fail to support positive self-relations), if one's subjective demands are too high, and thus can cause genuine unhappiness. Further, a move from less to more adequate recognition may mean that various cherished and valuable aspects of a form of life have to be tragically sacrificed (as according to Hegel happened to the Ancient Polis on the way towards more individualistic Modern forms of life).

It is less clear whether the Hegelian accounts can endorse ambivalence in the sense of suggesting that something is *appropriately* experienced as

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torical progress will take place. A theorist can be very pessimistic concerning the prospects of whether equal standing or non-domination of all humans will ever be realized, and nonetheless think that they are coherent ideas and ideals: there is no logical or conceptual necessity preventing them from being realized, and holding that when realized, they individuals' lives for the better.

2   Taylor's (1992) approach to the two forms of recognition (politics of universalism and politics of difference) is perhaps more ambivalent, melancholic, or tragic than Ikäheimo et al. suggest, given how politics of difference grows out of universalism, and given the role of conflicts between genuine goods. See Laitinen 2008.

3   On Consequentialism and Non-consequentialism, see e.g. Sinnott-Armstrong 2021, Pettit 1989, Alexander, Moore 2021.

unsatisfactory *misrecognition* (that is, not merely because of one's inflated expectations) even in the case of adequate recognition. There simply does not seem to be conceptual room for that. It must rather be that something is adequate *as* recognition, and so appropriately supportive of a positive relation to self, but detrimental to other aspects of one's life (that are not conceptually connected to recognition in any such way that would guarantee that any recognition that leads to bad outcomes in those respects is thereby misrecognition). The reason may be in the translation of social respect to self-respect. As Walzer (1983) has noted, a state cannot distribute self-respect, but only social bases of self-respect; and it is up to the individual's psychological make-up whether those are successfully translated into self-respect (see Laitinen 2014). One can think of a paradoxical psychological makeup, where one for contingent reasons feels unhappy or miserable, when receiving adequate recognition. The fact that adequate recognition does not guarantee happiness strengthens the deeper philosophical point about the nature of adequacy of recognition: it is drawn in non-consequentialist terms (Section One).

Can one think of a case in which all relations of recognition are fully adequate, but some persons are unfree, or unequal? I would argue that no (also on Hegel's view): on the view, where the criteria of adequacy are – instead of fallible subjective expectations – such values as equal human dignity and equal human freedom, recognition simply is not fully adequate when it involves regarding others as unequal, or involves domination (Section Three). Indeed, it seems that the Hegelian struggles for recognition are motivated by defective forms of recognition, in a dialectic of recognition (Section Five).

A third approach that Ikäheimo, Lepold and Stahl distinguish makes "the more radical claim regarding recognition's ambivalence that finds its paradigmatic expression in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre [1984, pp. 347-61], a claim according to which recognition from others is in itself problematic insofar as it fixes our identity. Recognition, from this perspective, is always *misrecognition* in the sense that it takes away the freedom of those whose autonomy it purports to acknowledge" (Ikäheimo, Lepold, Stahl 2021, pp. 3-4). Other critics of recognition of identity include Kelly Oliver (2001), who thinks that recognition is problematically tied with power and prefers to call the less problematic way of relating "witnessing", and Patchen Markell (2003). These approaches need to explain what is bad in fixing one's identity – it may be the loss of autonomy, or the presence of domination, in which case it seems again that the recognition in question is not fully adequate in the sense defended here (Section Four). But for a

more existential approach, the worry may be less the ambivalence of *recognition* as such, than the ambivalence of *being* something. If so, it would explain why recognition, even when it *is* adequate, leads to ambivalent results (Section Six below).

A fourth family of approaches that Ikäheimo et al. discuss argues that critical social movements may do better by focusing on other concepts than recognition, for their progressive aims (e.g., Fraser 2003, McNay 2008). Again, this sounds very plausible given that there are several values to which recognition is responsive, and several other values in addition to adequate recognition, so value pluralism can explain why critical social movements need several aims (Section Four). A version of this approach stresses that it is possible that as such adequate esteem or regard for the other's particular features leads the individual to submit to domination (Althusser 2001, Butler 1997, 2004). This is arguably the darkest side of (otherwise adequate) recognition. A submissive role can come with desired esteem for one's contributions in that role – and that esteem can sustain domination.[4] But, as mentioned, this raises the question whether the presence of domination will however mean that there is something wrong in the prevailing relations of recognition – they cannot be adequate forms of mutual respect (Section Four).

I will explore these different aspects of the ambivalence of recognition drawing on the view of recognition and misrecognition I have defended elsewhere (Laitinen 2002, 2003, 2010, 2012). I will explore the contrast between adequate and inadequate recognition. Does the non-consequentialist nature of that contrast explain the possibility of the ambivalence of recognition (Section One)? Can adequate recognition be detrimental to the recipient, or to others for that matter (Sections One and Two)? Is recognition the only value worth pursuing, as recognition monism would have it, or can it conflict with other worthwhile goals (Section Three)? Can recognition be adequate if it motivates submissiveness and helps sustain domination (Section Four)? Can inadequate recognition be dialectically necessary on the way to adequate recognition (Section Five)? Does the ambivalence of adequate recognition derive from some deeper "ambivalence of being" (Section Six)?

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4   It perhaps *need* not be the case that the recognizer thereby takes a stand on universal standing – it may be that the recognizer acts in good faith and does not realize that there is domination going on, and that the recognizer is not in a constitutive position concerning the domination. The recognizer may for example think that everyone ought to be equal and may be in the false conception that the societal relations respect that.

1. *The non-consequentialist nature of adequate recognition*

The contrast between adequate and inadequate recognition can be drawn in terms of appropriate, fitting *responses* to the other (Laitinen 2002, 2010; cf. Oliver 2001, 2018).[5] The appropriateness or fittingness derives from the other's normatively relevant features: *respect* is an appropriate response to the dignity, autonomy, equal moral standing of the other person independently of who the person is; *esteem, admiration, appreciation, gratitude* and *trust* are appropriate responses to the contributions, achievements and particular valuable features of the other person; and *love, care* and *concern* are fitting responses to the vulnerability and singular irreplaceability of the other. Recognition is adequate, when the features of the other call for certain responses, and the recognition constitutes such a response. By and large, adequacy of recognition is the same for one-sided attitudes and mutual or reciprocal ones.[6]

In many cases, the valuable feature is itself a result of prior recognition: the motivation behind achievements may have been greatly enhanced by prior esteem, and the potential person-making capacities (such as autonomy, rationality, morality), which ground the dignity of persons, are in humans actualized after a developmental phase which requires recognition. (This may raise the question of whether appropriate recognition in these developmental contexts such as childhood is forward-looking in the sense that it constitutes a call or summons to develop the capacities – so that appropriate recognition has a kind of "developmental bonus") (Laitinen 2002).

It is notable, but not much noted in the literature, that such definition of adequate and inadequate recognition is non-consequentialist. It is more at home with deontological, virtue-theoretical and care-based approaches than in consequentialist ones: appropriate responses to persons are those of respect, esteem, honour or care, justified by person-centered considerations, rather than promotion of overall value of states of affairs.[7]

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5   Kelly Oliver's "response ethics" follows Derrida and Levinas in demanding even impossible responsibility and stressing ambivalence, whereas the "response ethics" defended here is modelled after Aristotelean *phronetic* responsiveness for the right reasons in the right context in the right degree.

6   Note however that standing in relationships (mutual or otherwise) may affect what is adequate: friends have special obligations towards each other, parents have special obligations towards children, standing in solidarity comes with special obligations, promises and joint commitments create further obligations, speech acts like requests may create reasons, and so on.

7   This is perhaps no surprise as theories of recognition developed in the post-Kantian philosophy of Fichte and Hegel, and especially Hegel drew on Aristotle. For

The distinction between *respecting* (or honoring as it is often put) value, and *promoting* value creates one possible tension at the heart of recognition: the demand to respect creates deontological side-constraints that prohibit maximization of good outcomes (Pettit 1989, Raz 2001, Alexander, Moore 2021). Some deontological side-constraints derive from the dignity of persons. To give a stark example often used to illustrate this contrast, it is wrong (disrespectful, a case of recognitional inadequacy) for a doctor to kill one healthy person in order to save five. It is wrong to commit one murder even for the purpose of preventing five other murders done by someone else. It is even wrong to commit one murder now in order to prevent *oneself* from committing five other killings.[8] Some other deontological side-constraints relate to agent-relative reasons: what it is right for me to do in a situation may depend on my special relationships with some but not others in the situation (it is an adoption parent's responsibility to look after the adopted child, because a special dependence relationship has been created – whereas other children have other responsible adults to look after them). Because of such constraints, doing the right, respectful, recognitionally adequate thing need not lead to maximizing the best outcome.[9]

The central point is that adequate recognition can in these ways conflict with promoting the general goodness of resulting states of affairs, which consequentialist theories would stress. Adequacy of recognition not only cannot guarantee best outcomes but can explicitly conflict with the demand to promote the best outcomes. This theoretical non-consequentialism is therefore one central reason for why recognition can be ambivalent: adequate recognition can come with bad outcomes. The fitting, appropriate, respectful response to the other can indeed be the fitting, appropriate or respectful response even when it tragically leads to outcomes that are detrimental more generally, to the recipient, or to the recognizer, or the relationship between the recipients, or to progressive social causes.

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the roots of recognition-theories in French-speaking and English-speaking contexts, see Honneth 2021.

8   This case is typically imagined so that a doctor has caused organ malfunctions for five people who are in the process of dying (killed by the doctor) unless the doctor "harvests" viable organs from an innocent bystander. It is morally wrong to murder the innocent bystander even for the purpose of preventing the five deaths one has caused oneself.

9   Even in cases, where one overall ought to promote the value of general outcomes even though this is disrespectful of some person, this still counts as genuine misrecognition (perhaps excusable one) even though it is overall the right thing to do in a dilemmatic situation.

Take a sister, whose brother has committed some heinous crime, and hurt some victims. The respectful thing to do, at least on a Hegelian theory of punishment, is to tell one's brother that he ought to confess, or the sister will turn him in. It at the same time manifests a caring attitude towards the victims.[10] Paradoxical as it may sound, respect for someone as a fully responsible person can require a punishment for that person (if he acted with full powers of the mind), even when the punishment is not optimal for that person's well-being or quality of life. The principled reason for this is that the dignity of persons may require certain responses regardless of what the consequences for that person's well-being may be. Respect for dignity can conflict with promoting well-being.

2. *Adequate respect and esteem can be detrimental – what about care?*

Relatedly, recognition can be ambivalent if different forms of recognition pose conflicting requirements. In many cases, *respect* for the person as a responsible adult and *care* for the person as a needy, vulnerable being and a locus of suffering and well-being can come to conflict. Some socalled luck egalitarian think that a just society should care for the citizens only to the extent that their bad predicaments are the result of bad luck and circumstances and not their own responsible choice. Many think that this may be too harsh: a good society should extend for example health services also to those who are in ill health due to their own choices. This can be construed as a conflict between respect and care, between two forms of recognition. In that case, even though full respect can lead to detrimental outcomes, it is less clear whether full care can do so.[11] In any case, respect for a person's status as a responsible agent can conflict with care for that person's well-being.

Moreover, different aspects of respect can conflict. Respect for the dignity of a person and respect for that person's autonomous decisions may

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10   In many legal systems, one need not witness against the near and dear (or oneself), as this is held to be in contrast with the special close relationship – if so, then not turning the brother in might be the caring thing to do, given how bad effects the jail sentence would have for him. If one in a Socratic fashion thinks that it is worse to make others suffer than to suffer oneself, then it may of course be that the crime-without-punishment is nonetheless worse than crime-with-appropriate-punishment, in which case the truly loving deed from the sister would be to convince the brother to confess.

11   Here different answers to the Socratic question above will lead to different ideas about what full care requires.

also come in conflict. Suppose someone autonomously and voluntarily wills to do something that is not compatible with the dignity of persons; for example, to sell oneself to slavery, or for a short person to volunteer to be a "dwarf" in "dwarf-tossing" contests.[12]

One can also envisage settings, in somewhat fantastic thought experiments, which help to see the conceptual possibility, where A's recognizing B as free and equal leads in fact to B's not being free and equal. The most straightforward example is if there is another agent, C, who, say, with the threat of poison argues that if A recognizes B as free, C will see to it by poisoning that B loses their capacities to be free. If A in that situation expresses their recognition of B as free, then B will end up being less free.[13] One can think of another version, where A is unaware of this situation, but C in fact has the poisonous intention, or a version, where it is not the agent C but some natural circumstance or social mechanism which leads to B's demise. (Say, a situation where B will be psychologically distressed if A does not confirm one's recognitive attitudes out loud ("say you love me!"), but A and B are in a cave where any sound from A's direction will cause a rock slide hurting B physically). More realistically, people in structurally oppressed positions may end up in oppressive double-binds, where whatever they do, they end up maintaining oppressive structures.[14]

A further way in which adequate recognition may end up being detrimental to the recipient is that of adequate *esteem,* which can inadvertently lead to bad outcomes: public esteem and fame for great achievements can be detrimental to one's peace of mind and can, despite no ill intent on anyone's part, make the recipient's life miserable. Perhaps even more straightforwardly, negative but as such fitting feedback on failed attempts can also lead to lowered self-esteem. One may need esteem, but unfortunately not on this occasion deserve much esteem; and it is the latter that determines what kind of esteem is adequate. (Note that negative feedback can also lead to further motivatedness, as part of a "dialectics" of recognition, see below).

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12 Manuel Wackenheim v. France, Communication No 854/1999, U.N. Doc. CCPR/ C/75/D/854/1999 (July 15, 2002)

13 It could be that in some such cases of coerced misrecognition where A thinks of B's best and so declares that B is not free, one is excused for such declaration involving misrecognition – if excused, one is not responsible for the misrecognition. But then one would not be responsible for acting otherwise either, and indeed it seems that one *is* responsible, perhaps praiseworthy, for doing the right thing, if one prevents the poisoning.

14 See e.g. Hirji 2021.

Care for the person seems different. It supports taking anticipated and foreseeable negative consequences to the person's life as reasons. So perhaps *caring* comes closest to *promoting* the other's well-being as consequentialism would have it? There are three comments to make, however: care, considerateness and compassion can perhaps give reasons to *soften* the way in which adequate respect and esteem are expressed, rather than alter the contents of adequate esteem. Further, caring as a form of recognition is person-centered instead of consequentialist maximization of overall value of states of affairs (in which persons are in a sense just building blocks of the states of affairs, as in the goal of maximizing "average well-being"). Finally, caring also very naturally embodies special partial relationships, like friendship or solidarity, which are at odds with consequentialist impartiality. Expressions of care may include certain ways of engaging with the other, not any old ways of promoting the other's well-being. For example, promoting friendships in the world is a very different goal from being someone's friend and expressing this friendship in one's actions.

Caring is a response (to the other's vulnerability, neediness and singularity), but the range of actions it manifests in different situations are more clearly focused on promoting well-being in suitable ways than on respecting autonomy. One can be motivated to do paternalistic deeds, if considerations of care override considerations of respect for autonomy. Paternalism is perhaps the paradigmatic way in which as such adequate care can lead to bypassing the recipient's autonomy (and thus can be problematic). A caring person, a friend, need not however aim to *maximize* the friend's well-being: there may be a degree of deferral to what the recipient themselves thinks is good for them; or one may fulfil the friend's wishes while at the same time thinking that that is not what is best for the friend.

So, while *to some extent* care may soften the responses that adequate respect or adequate esteem justify, and soften the detrimental effects of adequate recognition, it nonetheless remains the case that even fully adequate recognition, including care, may also lead to bad outcomes to the recipient. In that sense, recognition may be ambivalent due to its consequences.

There may also be detrimental effects to the recognizer, or the relationship between the recognizers and the recipient: think again of the sister, whose life might be a lot easier and smoother without giving his brother in, but she acts out of respect and care for the brother and the victims. And the relationship between the sister and the brother may be strained because of that act (although the blame for the strain on that relationship naturally goes to the brother).

3. *Recognition and conflicts with other worthwhile goals*

The view outlined here cannot even in principle be committed to "recognition monism" as a view about value. This is because the very adequacy of recognition is defined in terms of other values such as dignity and autonomy of persons, well-being and absence of suffering and wounds. This view about recognition thus presupposes a plurality of values that persons can embody, and a range of those values make certain responses (respect, esteem, care) appropriate. Those values matter both in themselves, and as constitutive of valuable forms of social recognition.

We can perhaps imagine a somewhat utopian world where things would be perfect in terms of recognition of persons: respect, esteem and care would be appropriately realized. It would of course be a very different world from ours, which is characterized by persistent patterns of inequality, domination, oppression, marginalization, social invisibility, racism and sexism. But even in that utopian world, the other values might for contingent reasons be only partly realized: people might be unhappy because they have chosen wrong careers, the environment might be on a brink of a disaster, contingent changes in natural conditions might cause severe malnutrition, and there might be negligence or cruelty to animals (in which case due respect of the offenders again may require punishment). This kind of value pluralism easily explains why even fully adequate recognition globally does not guarantee a perfect world in other respects.

By the same token, conflicts are possible between recognition and other values. Societal progress towards more adequate structures enabling more equal recognition may require changes in other values: higher degree of recognition of individual autonomy may come with sacrifices in communal forms of life. Such pluralism also means that there are plural foci for progressive social and political movements: campaigns for purely economic aspects of justice, for cultural and scientific creativity, or climate or ecological sustainability need not have "recognition" as the dominant theorization. By contrast, recognition theories capture better social wrongs related for example to status inequalities, misrecognition of identities, and discrimination. Recognition concerns interpersonal relations and people's regard for each other, subjective repercussions in terms of self-respect or self-esteem, and institutional legitimacy and regard for persons; but material, cultural, ecological or economic preconditions of life are merely indirectly matters of recognition (Laitinen 2003).

4. *Recognition, domination, and submissiveness*

Arguably the main source of ambivalence in recognition is the way in which recognition may motivate submissiveness: roughly, if one gets praise in one's submissive role, one may be motivated to continue being in a dominated position. In such a position, one does not get a fully equal status, but one may get meaningful relationships and an accepted role in a community; and those are not nothing. It may well be, for example, that one acts "wisely" in choosing the least bad option in terms of one's own subjective well-being in accepting the submissive role (and one's friends caring for the person may advice accepting the submissive role).[15] This is arguably the darkest ambivalence in which adequate esteem can be included.

The esteem in question can arguably be fully adequate: one can be fully responsive to someone's contributions in some role, while at the same time acknowledging that some other role would suit the person better. But what if one thinks that the whole role should be abandoned in a structural reform of the institutions? What if, in the esteem for a woman's contribution in the role of a submissive housewife, is a built-in assumption that women are somehow by nature meant to serve in such roles? Or, think of a case of meritocracy extended beyond its proper boundaries. While it may be acceptable that a job offer is given, in a fair competition with equal opportunities, to the candidate with best merits, it would be wrong to give roles in a caste-like system of dominators and the dominated on the basis of esteem for merits, or indeed on *any* basis – such system simply should not exist.[16] So can the "esteem" in ranking some people's merits be adequate, if the assessment leads to placing the candidates to higher or lower caste? Perhaps it can be appropriate *as* esteem, but disrespectful of the fundamental equality of persons. If a societal arrangement is in conflict with the equal standing of everyone, it should be criticized. Insofar as the desire for recognition is instrumental for such system, or is put to use in the maintenance of such a system, it should be criticized. Recognition should not work as an underlabourer of oppressive systems.[17]

I think this charge is important and true. Oppressive systems no doubt benefit from certain constellations of recognition, which make participation in one's own oppression at some level psychologically rewarding. There are however recognitional resources for criticism of capitalism or

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15   See e.g. Gregoratto 2018; Ikäheimo, Lepold, Stahl 2021.
16   On a critique of meritocracy, see Elmgren 2020.
17   For an interesting angle to the ambivalence of recognition in terms of Bourdieu's "fields", "habitus" and "capital", see Piroddi 2020.

other oppressive systems – if oppressive, they are not fully consistent with
the equal dignity of people.[18] Incomplete, misdeveloped, or pathological
forms of recognition can be countered with adequate forms of recognition.
(See Laitinen, Särkelä, Ikäheimo 2015).

5. *The Dialectics of Recognition?*

In the Hegelian-Kojevean narrative an original struggle motivated by a
desire of recognition can lead to one unsatisfactory result: the death of one
party, in which case neither gets their desire for recognition satisfied – the
one is dead and the other lacks a recognizer. Another unsatisfactory result
follows when one of the parties, out of fear of death, gives up the struggle
and agrees to be the other's servant. This constellation combines aspects of
domination with some form of partial recognition. But the recognition is
unsatisfactory, because the servant gets recognition only as a subordinate
creature, and the master or lord gets recognition only from a subordinate
creature. They both thus get recognition in an unsatisfactory form only,
which is a driver for a change towards less ambivalent mutual recognition,
where both ultimately recognize each other as free and equal, while admit-
ting their dependence on each other (Hegel 1977, Kojève 1980).

This rich narrative has been interpreted in many ways. One interesting
aspect of it is the developmental stage of unequal recognition, which makes
visible the unsatisfactoriness of inequality. Each constellation of recognition
which falls short of equality, creates in the participants an urge for change,
and – although it need not yet be known by the participants in Hegel's nar-
rative – only when these changes lead to equality, is the urge satisfied. This
can be called a dialectical process, where the endpoint of equality can be
reached via immanent criticism of unequal arrangements: the relationship
of domination is in this respect unsatisfactory also to the dominator, who
cannot get relevant recognition. On this reading, ambivalence of recogni-
tion characterizes the earlier stages of inequality, but not the final stage of
equal mutual recognition. The endpoint of the Hegelian process seems to be
"optimist" in that sense, but without any guarantees that adequate recogni-
tion could not conflict with other values, or the recipients' well-being.

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18   The situation is similar with such general resources like language or thinking or
     action – certain forms of language use or thinking or action may be necessary for
     oppressive systems, but to counter such systems, one should not drop all language
     use, thinking, or acting. In contrast, language use, thinking and acting are powerful
     resources against oppressive structures. The same is true concerning recognition.

6. *The Existential Ambivalence of Being Something*

One root for the challenge of "ambivalence of recognition" comes from the Sartrean ideas of objectivity and transcendence (Ikäheimo, Lepold, Stahl 2021, pp. 3-4). Sartre's dualistic theory may be theoretically exaggerated, but I would like to suggest that it may capture a kind of experience of ambivalence in "being something" (which in comparison to occupying oppressed roles may rightly feel like a first-world problem). The idea is that even if others respond adequately to what one is, and no submissive role is at stake, but merely self-identification with one form of life rather than another, there can be a felt ambivalence. Recognition from others may make changing one's identity harder, it may "ossify" one's identity (by increasing the rewards of not changing via experiences of being accepted, or by increasing the costs of changing in violating others' expectations). But what is bad about fixed identity?

The cost of being something, of having a practical identity, is simply that one is not something else. *Determinatio est negatio.* To some extent, human agents shape what they are through their choices, so the ambivalence of "being something" is to that extent the ambivalence of choosing to be something. (Many of one's features are determined independently of one's will, but they also follow the same logic: being of one kind means that one is not another kind.) The cost of being something, or someone, is that one is not something else that one *could* be, or could have become. Being one kind of person means that one is not another kind of person. The cost of doing something in a situation is that one does not do something else in that situation. Every time one utilizes an opportunity, one *loses* other opportunities.

This can be called an "existential cost". The array of possibilities to choose from is of course always limited objectively, but for the angst of choosing freely, it suffices that there are several options. Losing all other options by choosing one is a genuine loss in that then the situation is gone, and one has lost all the other possibilities.

One can of course try to cope by choosing other possibilities later. Even though that precise situation, located at that point of time, is gone and does not arise for another time, sufficiently similar situations may arise. One may do experiments in living and postpone other choices for later. One's curiosity, or hunger for being something else, or something more, or of having "collected" certain experiences, will not be satisfied unless one actually has made the choice, actually has experienced that thing at some point in one's life. There can be a kind of "existential thirst" at play. Unless one has "been there, done that", the thirst will remain.

It may be somewhat frustrating to think that what one can be is just one drop in the ocean, there are at each moment quantities of other opportunities wasted, and only one option realized. It is of course good if the one option gets realized, but it can seem a mere silver lining: there are many more opportunities that go unrealized. There may be a kind of despair, caused by the human ability to choose.

When one attends to some structural features of the choices, the despair can be heightened. Often the choices are not about immediate consummation or immediate gratification, but mid- to long-term goals. The ambivalence in being something is the ambivalence of climbing one tree and thereby being unable to climb the other trees – one may want to climb them as well, but one cannot at the same time. (If one always, after having climbed a bit, panics and starts climbing another tree, one ends up climbing none of the trees). Longer-term goals are thus not only more rewarding but also more costly than short-term ones. Not to mention that some goals may require long practice, rehearsals, habituation, and so on.

The discussion remains a bit abstract before we add that the options are not of the same value, not equally desirable, or conductive to meaningful life – one can make more or less wise choices between them. To understand whether and why the ambivalence matters, we need to understand the value of different options. Why does it matter that one loses an option, a possibility to be something? On reflection, one may come to the conclusion that it does not matter that much, but one may also have the nagging feeling that one is missing out on important options. It matters, if that missed form of being is desirable, valuable, meaningful. If one gets to choose the best alternative, does it really matter that one does not get the worse alternatives? Or even, if there are several incommensurable, but roughly equally valuable options and one gets a good enough option, does the mere fact that other alternatives are thereby excluded have much weight? If one gets an exquisite dinner, does it matter *at all* that one does not get any of the possible tasteless meals? And isn't it downright good that one does not need to eat any of the foul-tasting ones? And isn't there a logical exclusion constitutive of the tastiness of the best dinner – adding any of the excluded flavors would just make the dinner taste worse. By analogue, is the ambivalence of being something really a problem at all unless there are hard choices between incommensurable but roughly equally valuable options? Perhaps not. This suggests that it is less the logical exclusivity and more the awareness of losing valuable, desirable options, that is the matter. But it does remain the case that in a plurality of desirable options, the value of the chosen option is to be balanced with the value of the other options – there

is ambivalence in being something and missing out being something else.[19] The kinds of otherwise adequate recognition that serve to "fix" what one is may thus strengthen or ossify the ambivalence.

Conclusion

This article has tried to think through how the view that defines adequate recognition as responsiveness to such values as dignity, autonomy, achievements, and vulnerability (see e.g. Laitinen 2002) would fare with the challenge of the ambivalence of recognition. I argued that the non-consequentialist nature of the contrast between adequate and inadequate recognition goes some way in explaining the possibility of the ambivalence of recognition (Section One). Adequate recognition can indeed be contingently detrimental to the recipient, to others, to the recognizer and for the general aggregated value of states of affairs, which consequentialism would have us maximize. Recognition is by no means the only value worth pursuing, as "recognition monism" would have it, but it can conflict with other worthwhile goals. I argued above that even adequate recognition-esteem can motivate submissiveness and help sustain domination, which is the main "dark side" of recognition. Yet the presence of domination is always a matter of disrespect or misrecognition; and there is nothing incoherent in realized system of equal standing. While not perhaps necessary (even for Hegel 1977[1807]), inadequate recognition can be dialectically a motivating and illuminating stage on the way to adequate recognition. To some extent, the ambivalence of adequate recognition derives from a deeper existential ambivalence of being something, rather than something else, but this is less a "dark" side of recognition than a somewhat melancholic or tragic aspect of our existence.[20]

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19   In addition, one may value having meaningful options, possibilities to choose, and having the freedom to choose between them.
20   I would like to thank Nikolai Klix for comments on the text.

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